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ASA SCOTT, THE STEAMBOAT BOY;

OR,

The Land Pirates of the Mississippi.

A Romance of a Rich Boy and a Poor Boy.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

CHAPTER I.

HIS OWN MASTER—HOW ASA SPROULE RESOLVED TO
SEE THE WORLD.

ONLY seventeen, and a fortune to spend!
This is how it happened.

Asa Sproule was the only son of respectable parents, who resided at the time of his birth, in a flourishing town on the Missouri river.

His father was a lawyer by profession, but not a very successful one, possibly because he did not give his entire attention to the law, but frittered away his energies upon what Col. Sellers would style "side speculations." He gradually abandoned the law, and became professedly a real estate agent, his office being a rendezvous for all sorts of schemers and projectors. He was always up to his ears in all manner of speculations, and the result was that he was at times considered to be a wealthy man, and at times he knew that he would be unable to meet his obligations, if he should be pressed to the wall. Thus his life was passed between poverty and riches, and his physical and mental health suffered under the constant strain of his unremitting endeavors to become wealthy.

His only son, Asa, was brought up in the belief that his father was, and necessarily would always be, a rich man, and he was given as good an education as that part of the country could then afford.

Asa's mother died when he was fifteen, shortly after he had entered a high-class academy which was dignified by the title of "college." He attended her funeral and was sent back to finish his education.

He was hardly seventeen when he was called to the death-bed of his father.

That ardent speculator had gone to the bad quite rapidly after the death of his wife. His speculations had become wilder and more varied, his mind was more unsettled than ever, and his affairs had become so inextricably involved that he was finally obliged to abandon his hopeless endeavors to straighten out the tangle.

Of all this Asa had no knowledge. He had reason to believe that his father owned large surfaces of land, and other properties of many varieties; but he could not know the precarious character of the ownership of all this reputed wealth. Consequently no one was more surprised than he—though many were surprised—when his father's estate was settled up, and there was nothing left.

Just nothing at all. Houses, lands, stocks, bonds, claims, interests, even the roof that had sheltered the boy since his babyhood—all were sold and swept away, and there was not enough to pay the debts.

Where, then, did the fortune come from?
You shall soon see.



"ALL ABOARD!" CRIED SNAKEROOT, "WE COULD TAKE HALF A DOZEN MORE PASSENGERS IF WE HAD 'EM."

Asa Sproule found himself penniless. He had his clothes and other personal effects, a trunk and an old carpet-bag containing some of his father's papers which had not been thought worth examining. It was necessary that he should do something, in order to live, and what should he do? He was determined that if poverty was to be his fate, he would not stay to suffer it in that town where he had always been well-to-do. The people with whom he had associated should not have a chance to point their fingers at him. He resolved that he would go to the city of St. Louis and seek his fortune. Of course his ideas on this subject were very vague and indefinite, and he did not attempt to put them into shape, but left them to be shaped by time and circumstance. He knew that he had a fair education and plenty of energy, and believed that he ought to win his way.

A sympathizing friend gave him money enough to take him to the city, and he bade adieu to his birthplace and the graves of his parents. As far as he knew, he had not a relative living. There were some distant connections of his mother's somewhere at the East, but he knew nothing about them. As for his father, Asa had never heard him speak of any other person of the name of Sproule.

There was nobody to help him. At the same time, there was nobody to hinder him.

Arrived in St. Louis, he established himself at a cheap hotel, and began his search for employment. It did not take him long to discover that there was no special demand in the busy world for boys of seventeen who were not able to do anything in particular. He grew tired and sick at heart, and time hung heavily on his hands.

One day, not knowing how else to pass the time, he betought himself of examining the papers in the old carpet-bag which he had brought with him, more as a relic of his father than because he attached any other value to it. He found a number of accounts, memoranda, maps, plots and other papers which did not appear to be of any earthly use to anybody. But at the bottom of this rubbish he discovered a bundle of certificates of stock in a Western silver mine.

He examined these papers carefully, and pondered over them. He did not suppose them to be of any value. If they had been worth anything, they would have been taken care of. He had heard of the silver mines in the far West, but generally in connection with the term "wild-cat." It was the most reasonable supposition that his father had got possession of the shares at a cheap rate, and had held them in the hope that they might some day be worth something. Discovering that they possessed no value whatever, and unable to persuade anybody to take them off his hands, he had finally thrown them into the carpet-bag with the rest of the rubbish. Of course they were worthless.

Yet Asa Sproule concluded that there could be no harm in offering them for sale, or at least in making inquiries concerning them.

He sought a broker's office, and found one on Third street. The sign read: "Richard Brashear, Broker. Money Exchanged. Stocks and Bonds Bought and Sold." There were other inscriptions, but this was sufficient for Asa's purpose. He stepped in, and inquired for the proprietor.

The call was answered by a stout, bushy-headed gentleman, past the prime of life, who asked the boy what he wanted.

"I have some mining stocks which I would like to sell, if they are worth anything," replied Asa, rather timidly. He was poor in spirit just then, as well as in purse, and the array of notes and gold in sight inspired in him a high respect for the proprietor of so much wealth.

"What sort of stocks?"

Asa handed one of his certificates to Mr. Brashear, whose eyes opened wide when he unfolded the paper. He scrutinized it closely, and then looked keenly at the boy.

"Have you any more of these?" he asked.

Asa handed him the rest of the bundle, and his eyes opened wider than ever.

"Come inside," said he. "I want to talk to you."

Directing his one clerk to watch the counter, Mr. Brashear ushered the boy into a little apartment in the rear, which was part counting-room and part snugery. He placed a chair for Asa, and took a seat directly opposite to him.

Then ensued a scene that made the boy open his eyes.

The broker pushed back his bushy hair with one hand, with the other slapped the bundle of certificates against his knee, and appeared to be ready to burst into tears.

"It is too bad!" he exclaimed. "Here is a splendid chance for a swindle, but Dick Brashear ain't the man for the emergency!"

"What do you mean?" asked Asa.

"I don't mean you. I mean myself. You seem to be an honest boy, and I don't doubt that you are. I am honest myself, I am sorry to say. I wish I wasn't, but how can I help it? I was born so, and it sticks to me, in spite of everything. What a lot of splendid chances I have missed, through not having spunk enough to be a scamp! Lord knows that I have tried hard enough to learn the ropes of roguery, but I have never succeeded, and am still nothing but an old-time Kentucky idiot. That's what the matter with old Dick Brashear."

Unable to per-elve what the broker's lamentation of his lack of rascality had to do with the business at hand, Asa again asked him what he meant.

"Mean? I am almost ashamed to say. But I will tell you, my boy, so that you can understand it without half trying, and then you will despise me as an infernal fool. Here are you, a green country boy—if you will excuse the expression—bringing to

me a lot of papers, of the value of which you know not a bit more than a 'coon knows of Christmas, wanting to sell them, no doubt, and glad to get rid of them, of course. Now, what hinders me from hum-and-ing over those papers, sneering at worthless silver stock, abusing you for bringing such stuff into a respectable office, and finally offering you a few dollars for the lot? Nothing hinders me but my infernal folly."

"I don't yet understand you, sir."

"You would take the offer, of course. I would pay you the money, and you would be glad to get it. The certificates would be mine, and to-morrow I would jump straight into a fortune."

"A fortune!" exclaimed Asa.

"Yes, a fortune. These stocks are Consolidated Virginia. Have you never heard of Consolidated Virginia?"

"Don't know that I have."

"Or the bonanza that has been struck in the Comstock ledge?"

"I have read something about the bonanza, but didn't know what it meant, and have scarcely thought about it."

"That is what comes of not having your wits about you. You ought always to think about everything. There's never any telling what may have an important bearing upon your own welfare. Listen to me, boy. Thirty days ago these certificates had no market value to speak of. The holders had to pay in installments more than they would bring. Now the bundle which you have placed in my hands is worth more than two hundred thousand dollars."

"Two hundred thousand dollars!"

The boy jumped to his feet, and his big black eyes fairly blazed with wonder and delight. Was it possible that one of Martin Sproule's ships had come into port with a full cargo, that one of his most unpromising speculations had at last realized a fortune, and that he had died without knowing it? This was too much like the story of Aladdin and the lamp to be easily believed.

"Don't you believe it?" asked the broker. "I will soon prove it to you."

He glanced at a stock-list, counted the certificates, and made some calculations.

"Two hundred and ten thousand," he said. "It may be a few dollars more or less, but that is about the figures. Now, don't you think that I am an infernal fool?"

"I think that I am very glad that I came to you," replied Asa. "You shall have the ten thousand."

"Thank you, but I am not in the habit of taking money I don't earn. Haven't got good business sense, you see. Sit down, my lad, and tell me something about yourself. I want to know how you came into possession of these certificates."

Asa Sproule sat down and told his story, and entirely satisfied Mr. Brashear of the honesty of his acts and intentions.

"I can't see," said the broker, "that your father's creditors have any just claim upon these certificates. They grabbed at everything within reach, forced the property to a sale, and did you a great wrong by not nursing the estate so as to make it bring something like its value. But it might make you feel easier if you should go up there and pay off their claims, as they probably don't amount to much."

"I will tell you just what I will do," said Asa. "I will settle squarely with the decent ones; but there are a few scamps who will never get a cent from me if I can help it."

"Very well. I don't blame you. But you will have to sell some of the stock."

"I propose to sell it all. What would you advise?"

"I don't know what to advise. It may be worth more in time, and it may be worth less. It has gone up like a rocket, and it may come down like a stick."

"Just so," said Asa. "It was my luck that sent it up, just when I needed it, and now my luck tells me that I had better sell out—realize, I believe you call it. I shall put fifty thousand in some other mining shares that can be got low, and trust to my luck to send them up. The rest of the money I shall want you to take care of for me."

The details of Asa Sproule's business were easily settled. The certificates were soon sold, and the sale realized about the amount that Mr. Brashear had named. Asa made a trip to his old home, where he surprised the people by paying the greater part of his father's remaining indebtedness, and putting off a few rapacious creditors with "a piece of his mind." Then he returned to St. Louis, to consult with Mr. Brashear about his plans for the future.

"I mean to travel before I think of doing anything else," he said, "and the first point I shall aim at will be New Orleans."

After taking out a considerable sum for expenses, and receiving a certificate of deposit for use in case of an emergency, he engaged his passage on the steamer War Eagle, bound for New Orleans, as he preferred that mode of traveling to the quicker but more tiresome railroad trip.

Thus it was that Asa Sproule found himself his own master, at the age of seventeen, with a fortune to spend.

CHAPTER II.

THE STEAMBOAT BOY—A COUPLE OF "ACES."

ASA SCOTT, otherwise "Snakeroot,"—age unknown, but supposed to be about seventeen—pantry-boy on board the steamer War Eagle, plying between St. Louis and New Orleans.

Behold him as he stands on the levee at St. Louis, or, rather, on the street that faces the levee, occupying the curbstone edge of the pavement in front of one of those levee shores, in which may be procured everything that a deck-hand or a deck-passen-

ger is supposed to want, from a suit of clothes to a glass of beer.

He is rather tall for his presumed age, and his leanness would suggest an absence of good feeding on board the War Eagle—a suggestion which would not be borne out by the facts. His tow-like hair is bushy, and stands out from his head "like quills upon the fretful porcupine," although kept in place to a degree by a tattered felt hat. He wears a coarse "hickory" shirt, and a pair of dilapidated pantaloons, held up by a single suspender, and his stockinged feet are incased in coarse brogans. This, it must be understood, by way of apology, is Snakeroot's shore rig. When he is on duty, and the War Eagle is under way, his attire is somewhat neater; but when he is ashore he adopts the manner of the levee rat, and prefers to appear as a tattered demagogue.

As he stands there at the edge of the curbing, with his back against a post, there is an expression in his keen gray eyes and on his sharp features that means mischief. He looks defiance at mankind in general, and seems to be watching for a fight.

If that is what he wants, he has not long to wait. Down the levee, on the river side of the street, comes an Irish deck hand, somewhat the worse for liquor, although the morning is not half spent. He, too, has blood in his eye, and is manifestly on the war-path. He sees Snakeroot, and the effect is such as when a tall dunghill rooster spies a bantam, and the bantam utters its shrill cry of defiance.

He crosses from the levee slope toward the curbing, and approaches Snakeroot; but the boy, although his eyes are everywhere, and nothing escapes their notice, does not stir from his position.

Evidently there is cause for hostility between those two, for the deck hand's fingers work as if they would gladly clutch the throat of the boy, and there is a hungry glare in his eyes; but Snakeroot regards him quite coolly and rather carelessly.

"I've got yez now, ye young blaggard," he says, as he stands and faces the boy.

"Think so?" snappishly replies Snakeroot.

"I know it, ye thafe of the worruld! Didn't yez tell the cap'n on me that I had been sh't'alin' whusky from a bar 'on the up trip?"

"Didn't yer steal it, then?" replied Snakeroot, answering the question in the Yankee fashion.

"And didn't the cap'n tell the mate, and didn't the mate put me off at Cairo, widout payin' me me wages?"

"Reckon he did if he knows his business, and I reckon he does."

"And now I'm goin' to git even wid yez, and to pay yez well for that same."

"Ante up, old man," said Snakeroot, holding out his hand.

"It's a good likin' ye're goin' to git, as sure as me name's O'Dowd."

"Bet yer four bits yer can't do it. Bet yer six bits to four, and give the money to the widders and orfins when I win."

The deck hand's reply to this taunt was a blow, but Snakeroot was cleverly out of the way.

Then, all of a sudden, the boy seemed to be doubled up into a ball, and to be flying through the air as if propelled from a catapult, or shot out of a cannon. The head of this human shell struck O'Dowd in the stomach, and he fell backward on the pavement, with the breath knocked out of him. This exploit was greeted with the laughter and cheers of several bystanders, who had come out from the leveeshops and caves to witness the singular duel.

Perhaps a minute passed before the deck hand slowly picked himself up, looking about with a dazed and perplexed expression of countenance. Then he moved slowly toward a small pile of stones and stooped for one of them.

"Drop it!" shouted Snakeroot, who had already armed himself with two of those primitive weapons.

"Drop it, I say!" repeated Snakeroot.

O'Dowd did drop the stone. Then he hesitated, looked around, and grasped it again.

At that instant Snakeroot's right hand was thrown back and launched forward, and the missile that left it whizzed through the air and struck his adversary fairly on his right hand.

The deck hand dropped the stone, jumped up with a howl of pain, and hugged his right hand with the left, while he fairly spun around in the street.

"You had better get out of this, stranger," said a burly bystander, as he stepped up to him. "If you want to fight wild-cats, you can go West and find them; but it don't seem to be safe to meddle with that boy."

Apparently O'Dowd was of the same opinion, for he thrust his wounded hand into his pocket, and straggled away up the levee, without saying another word.

Snakeroot thrust both his hands into his pockets, resumed his position at the post, and whistled softly looking about as if he expected another adversary to come in sight.

While he is thus occupied, let us inquire who Snakeroot is.

He could not furnish much information on that point himself. He could more easily tell what he was than who he was. He knew that his "sure enough" name was Asa Scott, and he had indistinct recollections of a little log cabin away up on the Ohio, or the Alleghany, or the Monongahela—some where in that region, where he had first become aware of his existence. Connected with the log cabin were a slouchy man and a frowsy woman, who possessed several other tow-headed children and a number of ill-conditioned curs, but little else that could be called property.

Asa also knew that he had emerged from obscu-

uncomfortable surroundings, and had made his advent into a broader world, not a better one, by boarding a coal fleet on its way from Pittsburg to Memphis. As he always refused to explain how he accomplished that feat, it may be suspected that he borrowed a skiff without leave of the owner, and was troubled with compunctions of conscience. Be that as it may, he was permitted to remain on the broad-horn after he had boarded it, and to act as cook's helper, the cook being a boy not much older than himself, but so versed in the ways of the world that to Asa he was a paragon.

The boy soon discovered that so far as comfort was concerned he had jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire; but he had considerable knowledge knocked into him before he reached Memphis, and nothing could have tempted him to return to the little log cabin away up yonder.

Being thus launched in life as a boatman, he remained a boatman. The life suited him, and he had no inducement to leave it. He soon got above coal-boats, and tried his fortune on stove-boats, hay-boats and earthenware-boats, making journeys from the head-waters of the Ohio to New Orleans.

When he began to consider himself an experienced boatman, and had acquired a fair share of worldly wisdom, he aspired to steamboats, and worked himself forward from stern-wheelers to side-wheelers, until he reached the dignified position of pantry-boy on the fine packet War Eagle. He had thought of entering himself as a "cab" pilot, and saw no reason why he should not become a captain.

What had he learned in the course of this severe and varied experience? Besides a good deal of knowledge, useful and otherwise, he had also acquired a few accomplishments. He could whistle, could sing, and could play the fiddle. He had also picked up reading and writing, and had the knack of being able to see the humorous side of events and describe it to others. He had even gained some little facility in putting his thoughts on paper.

Decidedly Snakeroot was a boy of talent, but the instinct of vagabondism was strong in him.

He maintained his position at the post until he got tired of waiting for another opportunity for the exercise of his peculiar abilities. Then he sauntered up to the corner of Pine street.

Just then there came down the street to the levee a young gentleman dressed in an entirely new suit of black, and carrying a spick-and-span new valise. It was evident that he had not yet become accustomed to his new clothes, that his new valise was a burden to him, and that he was not entirely familiar with the ways of a city. It was also evident that he was looking for a steamboat. Therefore he was pounced upon by two runners who were lying in wait for unwary passengers.

"Where will I find the War Eagle?" he asked.

Thereupon the runners began to protest that he had better not find the War Eagle, but should step right aboard the Republic, which was a new, fine and fast steamer, lying right there, and about to start immediately; whereas the War Eagle was an old, leaky and slow-going tub, which would be sure not to leave port that day, and might never be permitted to make another trip. In a word, they piled the usual weapons of craft, without regard to truth or consistency of statement.

Perceiving that the young gentleman was bewildered by these representations, and that the War Eagle was in danger of losing a passenger, Snakeroot thought that it was time for him to interfere.

"Oh, gelong, you fellows!" he said, as he sailed into the controversy. "The gentleman's head is level, and he knows what he wants to do. There is the War Eagle, sir, right afore your eyes, with steam up, and out she goes to-day, or the world comes to an end. There is the Republic, and has she got any steam up? Not a smudge, and these men know that she can't stir till the holes in her boilers are soldered up and new planks are put in her rickety wheels. Shall I carry your baggage to the War Eagle, sir?"

"I can carry it myself," said the young gentleman, as he allowed himself to be led away victoriously.

"Do you belong to the War Eagle?" he asked, as he followed his leader down the levee.

"Reckon I do, unless she belongs to me, and I reckon she don't," so he piloted his prize to the War Eagle and up to the clerk's office, where he left him to arrange for his passage and secure a state-room.

CHAPTER III.

THE TWO "ACES" AFLOAT.

THE War Eagle rounded out from the St. Louis levee at the appointed hour, with a good load of freight and a fair allowance of passengers, and steamed proudly down the Mississippi. The early part of the trip was quite uneventful, and she passed Cairo, and entered the broader and deeper expanse of the lower river without the occurrence of any noteworthy incident.

To Asa Sproule—the youthful passenger who had been brought aboard by Snakeroot—the novelty of his situation and of the changing scene was at first quite exciting; but the novelty wore off, the scenery became monotonous, and he began to feel bored.

This was of course a natural reaction, but he was not inclined to submit to it, and he looked about for some means of making the time pass more pleasantly. Acquaintances are easily formed on the Western rivers, and it had come to be understood among the passengers, although he was not at all given to boasting, that he was a young fellow of fortune, who was traveling for amusement, and that he meant to see the world. Consequently his society was courted. Consequently he fell into the company of those

who played cards at night in the forward cabin, and he played at first for amusement, and afterward for money.

These points were noted by Snakeroot.

The duties of the pantry-boy did not often call him into the cabin, but he was there occasionally, and nothing escaped his observation. He particularly noticed the young passenger whom he had captured from the runners, and in whom he appeared to take an unusual interest.

It was manifest that Asa Sproule was unused to traveling and unacquainted with the ways of the big world.

"A greeny," decided Snakeroot.

His frank and open manner, and his polite and gentlemanly bearing, attracted attention.

"A good feller, though," guessed Snakeroot.

It was soon apparent that he was the possessor of considerable money.

"Got the props to support his dignity," observed Snakeroot.

He was in the habit of showing his money unnecessarily and carelessly.

"He ain't used to handlin' big piles of the lucre," inferred Snakeroot.

He sat down to play cards in the cabin.

"Now they will get him where the hair is short," said Snakeroot.

Soon it was manifest that money was being put up on the game.

"Dog-goned if I don't go and speak to the cap'n," declared Snakeroot. "Those sharpers will swindle that chap out of his boots, if somebody don't look after him."

Snakeroot was as good as his word, and requested the captain to interfere between Asa Sproule and the gamblers. This was a piece of presumption, but Snakeroot was a general favorite, and in some respects a privileged character, on board the War Eagle.

"All right," said Captain Ryers. "I will look after the young fellow and see that he don't come to harm. But it will scarcely hurt him to get bit a little, as he must learn his lesson some time."

This assurance was not entirely satisfactory to Snakeroot, whose displeasure increased when he looked into the cabin again. There was a pretty big pile of money on the table, and he saw Asa Sproule "going down" into his pocket for more.

"If the cap'n don't put a stop to that thing afore long, I'll find a way to bust up the game," said Snakeroot to himself, as he passed through the pantry, and walked out on the after guard.

Suddenly there was a dull, smothered sound, utterly indescribable, unless it may be called a cross between the roar of a cataract and the boom of a cannon, at once understood by all within its reach, though they had never heard anything like it before.

The boiler of the War Eagle had burst!

The sound of the explosion was at once followed by the rush of steam that filled the cabin and penetrated every part of the boat, by the crashing of timbers, and by the cries and shrieks of scalded, maimed and frightened men and women. The splendid War Eagle, a moment ago full of life and activity, had become a wreck and a charnel-house!

From this scene Snakeroot was suddenly and mercifully separated. Standing against a thin partition which was blown away in a mass, he was thrown out into the air, and alighted in the water at a considerable distance from the shattered steamer.

The game which had excited Snakeroot's indignation was effectually broken up without his intervention!

There were three men in the game besides Asa Sproule. One of them was a pleasant old gentleman whose acquaintance he had formed on the boat, named Col. Thomassieu, and known as a Southern planter. The other two were professional gamblers, although the old gentleman probably was not aware of their character, and the boy certainly was not. The game was the exciting one of poker, with opportunities for unlimited betting.

It was a bad start for Asa, that at the beginning of his enjoyment of his fortune he should fall into gambling; but he was determined, as is the case with all beginners in the dangerous pastime, that he would not go too far, and he thought that he could afford to lose a little money, for the sake of killing time and "seeing life."

His intentions were easily understood by the gamblers, who knew how to draw him on, and permitted him to win occasionally, in the hope of securing a heavy bet from him in the course of the night. But they had a double game to play, against the old gentleman and the boy, and the same tactics would not apply to both.

Thus it happened that an altercation arose in the course of the game. At one time the betting, which was quite heavy, was confined to Col. Thomassieu and the gambler who faced him—a coarse-looking man, with bushy hair and beard. The old gentleman had shown his hand, claiming the stakes, when the money was seized by his opponent, in spite of Col. Thomassieu's indignant protest.

Asa Sproule fired up immediately at this high-handed proceeding.

"Drop it!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, but in a very decided tone.

The gambler looked at the boy in surprise, but also looked into the barrel of a cocked revolver which Asa had leveled at his head.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," replied Asa, "that I don't pretend to know much about this game, but I do know that you have no right to grab the stakes in that way. Col. Thomassieu is a gentleman, and will give you all that belongs to you. Put down the money, and settle the matter squarely."

The other gambler, who had introduced himself as Major Brackett, was a tall and handsome man, with black hair and mustache, and of gentlemanly appearance and manners. A wicked look came into his eyes when the revolver was drawn, but he quickly recovered himself, and smiled as he stroked his mustache.

"Our young friend is right," he said. "We are a party of gentlemen, playing for amusement, and any differences that arise ought to be settled without a quarrel. Put down the money, Mr. Madden, and our young friend will put up his pistol, and we will proceed in order, as they say in Congress."

The money was restored to its place on the table, and Asa Sproule's pistol was restored to its place in his pocket. After a brief discussion it was agreed that the money belonged to Col. Thomassieu, who pocketed it, and the game proceeded quietly.

It may as well be understood that Major Brackett believed that he had a better and safer pigeon to pluck in the boy than in the old gentleman, or the affair would not have been terminated as it did, and Asa's rash act might have been severely accounted for.

This was evidently understood by Madden, and thereafter the efforts of both the gamblers were devoted to drawing the boy on, so as to induce him to bet heavily.

Their tactics promised to succeed. Asa occasionally won and lost small amounts, precisely as the confederates intended that he should do, and was becoming excited. At last the betting was confined to him and Major Brackett.

"It is very strange," said Col. Thomassieu. "I get no more cards than are worth looking at."

Madden made a similar declaration, and Major Brackett and Asa proceeded to increase the pile of money on the table by betting against each other.

"I will go ten dollars better," said Asa, after a final look at his cards.

"I call you!" responded his opponent. "What have you got?"

"Two aces."

The major smiled, and Madden broke out into a broad and insulting laugh.

Then came the explosion, followed by the breaking of timbers, the rush of steam that filled the cabin, and a horrible confusion of shouts and shrieks.

The instinct of self-preservation was strong in Asa Sproule. He rose instantly from the table, which was in the forward part of the cabin, and dashed out through the open door, closely followed by the others, who were followed by the blinding, scalding steam. The table was overturned, and the money was scattered on the floor of the cabin, with none to claim it.

Death had won the stakes!

In a moment—he could not have told how it happened—Asa found himself in the water, which was already crowded with struggling human beings.

He was a good swimmer, and had practiced the art in the rapid and turbid stream of the Missouri; but he had never had such difficulties to encounter as he found here. The suddenness of the catastrophe, and the frightful confusion that followed it, were enough to turn the strongest head, and there were few of the survivors who were not frantic with pain or fear. They struggled madly in the water, snatching at everything that could be seen or felt, and the stoutest swimmer was liable to be seized in a despairing embrace and dragged down to death. The boy also labored under the disadvantage of being incumbered with his clothes, which soon began to hamper his movements and weigh him down like lead.

He retained his presence of mind sufficiently to know that he must get rid of at least a portion of his clothing, and he supported himself by treading water until he had got one arm, and then the other, out of the sleeves of his coat.

At this moment he was seized by a sinking man, but the grasp only relieved him of his coat, which went down under the muddy surface of the Mississippi in the death-clutch of the drowned.

The boy knew that he had narrowly escaped a terrible danger, and he struck out boldly to clear himself of the other strugglers. As he did so his foot was seized, and he was drawn under the muddy water. He kicked vigorously, more from the force of instinct than from conscious will, and succeeded in freeing himself before he was quite strangled, and rose to the surface in a state of almost complete exhaustion.

But he was alive, and at a considerable distance from the wreck. He could still distinguish the cries of the sufferers in and out of the water, and knew that they were perishing unaided. But he could do nothing to help them. It was idle to think of it, when every effort must be devoted to saving his own life, and when the utmost efforts might not avail. His only visible chance was to reach the shore, and he reasoned that if he should exert himself as little as possible, just enough to keep afloat, his strength might hold out until the current should carry him sufficiently near to the bank to enable him to reach it. But he was already very weary, and his boots and clothing seemed to increase in weight with every moment.

"Hello-o-o!"

The hail was clear and distinct, and Asa Sproule thought that he recognized the voice. He was sure that it was not a cry for help. He looked down the river, and saw a long, dark object, above which a human face was dimly visible.

The dark object was a drifting log, and the human face was the face of Snakeroot.

"This way!" shouted Snakeroot. "Just reach this log, and you're all right."

Asa Sproule struck out vigorously and hopefully, and soon laid hold of the log.

Snakeroot lifted his leg over the log, and offered to help his fellow-passenger to the same position. "All aboard!" he cried. "We could take half a dozen more passengers if we had 'em."

"What is your name, my friend?" asked Sproule.

"Asa Scott. Commonly called Snakeroot. What's yours?"

"Asa Sproule."

"Two aces, by hokey!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE "HONEST TRADER"—A QUEER CRAFT AND QUEER CREW.

"Two aces," repeated Sproule, as he squeezed the water out of his hair. "That is what I was betting when the boat blew up."

"You don't say!" responded his companion. "I don't want to be too familiar on short acquaintance; but I must say that a feller who would bet on two aces, in such a crowd as you drifted into, deserved to be blowed up."

"I am inclined to believe that you are right about that."

"I saw that game goin' on, and was worried about it. I meant to raise some sort of a row, so as to break it up; but the b'iler did that job as clean as a whistle."

"I am glad that you took so much interest in me. Do you object to card-playing?"

"Well, I don't know as I am ag'in' it on general principles, as a feller may say. Them as wants to play may play, for all me. But when it comes to gamblin', I say none of that for Snakeroot, if you please. I know just enough about it to know that it's a mighty good thing to let alone."

By this time the two boys had drifted a considerable distance below the ill-fated War Eagle, which had taken fire and lodged on a sand-bar, where she was rapidly burning to the water's edge. A passing steamboat, which had gone to her assistance was held near her, picking up the survivors.

The scene was fearfully grand, as the flames of the burning boat lighted up the entire river, and the black smoke that rolled upward made the dark sky yet darker. Although the position of the boys on the log was by no means a pleasant one, they could not help feeling that they had been providentially preserved from a far worse fate.

"How do you feel, pardner?" asked Snakeroot.

"Pretty well," replied Sproule. "We might be a great deal worse off."

"That's so. Did you git hurt?"

"There is nothing the matter with me, except that I am wet. How long do you suppose we will have to navigate the Mississippi on this log?"

"Can't say. All night, perhaps. In the mornin' somebody will be apt to see us and take us off."

"How can we stand it until morning?" asked Sproule. "We will fall asleep and drop into the river."

"Reckon not. We've got to stand it."

"That settles the question, then. But if the current should carry the log pretty well in toward the bank, I will propose that we quit it and swim ashore."

"All right if you say so," replied Snakeroot. "For my part, when I think of the people up yonder, who have been scalded and burned and drowned, I don't feel like grumblin'."

"Isn't that a light, Snakeroot, down yonder at the edge of the water? Yes, I am sure it is."

Snakeroot eagerly looked in the direction pointed out by his companion.

"You are right," he said. "It is a light, and it is on a flatboat, probably a trading boat. Perhaps the folks are awake."

"Suppose we swim to it."

"Purty big swim, that, and I don't feel like takin' too many risks. Don't like to let go of this log, either, except for a sure thing. But we can steer the log over that way, if you say so, and hail the boat."

This proposition was agreed to, and the boys got into the water and swam their best, guiding the log toward the west bank. When they were within hailing distance of the flatboat, Snakeroot mounted the log and shouted.

His "Hallo-o-o!" rung out loud and clear on the night air, startling the echoes of either shore.

"You have good lungs, my friend," said Asa Sproule.

"Fine voice for callin' soundins' from the b'iler deck. Ain't that a bully yell, though?"

Snakeroot repeated his hail again and again, until it was answered by a husky hail from the shore. Then he explained in a few words the position and condition of himself and his companion, and an indistinct reply was understood to promise assistance.

In a few moments the splash of oars was heard, headed toward the log. In the skiff was a rough-looking, heavy-bearded man, who backed it up against the log, so that the boys could enter.

"Row did you ever git inter that fix?" he asked, when the boys were safe in the skiff.

"We were on the War Eagle when she blew up," replied Asa Sproule.

"Blew up! The War Eagle blowed up?" exclaimed the man. Then followed a string of oaths that astonished, and probably disgusted his hearers.

"You seem to take it mighty hard, mister," remarked Snakeroot. "Did you own her?"

The man rested on his oars a minute, and had the appearance of being irritated by this remark. "I reckon I might hev owned somethin' on her," he said. "Mought hev had some freight aboard, or some friends a-travelin'. Don't you be too fresh, young chap."

Snakeroot hastened to disclaim the intention of being "fresh," and asked the man's pardon.

"All right," said he. "Just you keep on takin'

care not to be too fresh. You may hev heard of jumpin' up of the fryin' pan inter the fire. Blowin' up of a steamboat ain't nothin' to what mought happen if you should fool with Jake Bumstead."

Both of the boys heeded this caution, answering Jake Bumstead's inquiries very respectfully, and soon the skiff reached the flatboat, and they stepped aboard, following his lead.

Snakeroot's sharp eyes took in everything on and about the flatboat. There was nothing to distinguish it from the ordinary trading-boats that were accustomed to do business along the rivers, except that it was somewhat shabbier in its construction than most of them, that it displayed no signs, and that no sort of merchandise was visible.

The boys followed Jake Bumstead into the interior of the flatboat. The apartment into which they were ushered was about ten feet square, cut off from the rest of the boat by a plank partition. It contained a small cooking-stove, a bench on two of its sides, a table, two chairs, and some miscellaneous "traps." On the table were a bottle, two glasses, and a pack of cards. On one of the chairs, within easy reach of the bottle and the glasses, was seated a rough-looking young man, with an unpleasant cast of countenance, who bore a strong family resemblance to Jake Bumstead. In a corner of one of the benches crouched a lad who might have been a year or two younger than the two Asas, and who resembled Jake Bumstead in no particular whatever, being thin and pale, with black hair and large, dark eyes, and with what may be styled a "hunted" expression of countenance. He was dressed only in a coarse shirt, a pair of shabby tow trousers, and rough brogan shoes. His eyes lighted up when the boys entered the boat, but instantly dropped before the frown of Jake Bumstead.

That important personage proceeded to introduce the new-comers.

"Here ye are, young fellers," he said, "safe out of the wet; and here you will be safe and comfortable. This is my eldest and only son, Nathaniel Bumstead, which I call him Nat."

"Here's to yer," said Nat, as he raised one of the glasses to his mouth.

"Don't touch it too heavy, my son," continued the elder Bumstead. "Remember that it bitheth like a serpent and stings like an adder, when you touch it too heavy. You may have heard me mention my name, young fellers—Deacon Jacob Bumstead, of Cache Creek, Injanny. And this boat is the Honest Trader, built by me, and bel'ngin' to me, and bound down the Mississippi on a tradin' expedition. Now sit down on one of them benches, and jest make yer-selves to hum."

Before Asa Sproule took his seat, he cast an inquiring glance at the boy in the corner, and Jake Bumstead, whose eye nothing escaped, at once answered the look.

"That," said he, "is Tom Brackett, the son of an old friend of mine, who is makin' the trip with us to larn the trade."

The name suggested to Asa the Major Brackett with whom he had been playing cards when the War Eagle exploded; but the thought passed as quickly as it came.

"What do you trade in, Mr. Bumstead?" Snakeroot mildly ventured to ask.

"Everythin' in general, and nothin' in partic'lar. We are on a speckleratin' trip, ready fur anythin', from ginseng root to sugar b'ilers. The Honest Trader brought down a load of stumware, and traded it off. Now she is ready to fill up with somethin' that will sell down to New Orleans. What do you think, now, of chickens as a speckleration?"

"There is money in chickens," remarked Snakeroot.

"Of course there is, and to chickens we can add turkeys and ducks and geese, with feathers and other odds and ends. But you are so wet, you fellers."

"Dry, too," suggested Nat Bumstead, tapping the bottle.

"Have a little, boys!" asked the self-styled Deacon. "Jest a drop to keep you from ketchin' cold? No? Shake up the fire, then, Nathaniel, and give 'em a chance to dry the 'r clothes."

The fire was made to burn brightly, and a bench was moved down to the front of the stove, on which the two Asas were seated. As the steam arose from their saturated garments, Jacob Bumstead pressed them to tell the story of the explosion.

Each told, in his own way, all he knew of that disaster, except that Asa Sproule said nothing about the game of cards in which he had been a partaker when the explosion occurred. He had an impression that he would do well to avoid that branch of the subject.

"You are a pair of mighty lucky chaps," said the Deacon. "Instead of bein' scalded, or burned, or drowned, here you are, safe aboard the Honest Trader, and in good, respectable company. I reckon you both had your suppers afore you got off the boat, as I may say."

The boys admitted that this supposition was correct.

"Then all you want is a good sleep to-night and a good breakfast in the mornin'. Do you happen to have a little money about you, to pay for the accommodation?"

Asa Sproule thought that he might have a dollar or two left, and Snakeroot doubted whether he could squeeze out more than "six bits."

"Very well. I am a poor man, myself; but I will do the best I can fur you, and won't be hard on you. Foller me, if you want to go to bed."

He opened a door in the partition, and led the boys into a narrow passage, about ten feet in length, with a door at the end, showing that there was yet a third portion of the flatboat set off to itself. At

the left of the passage were two doors, one of which Bumstead opened, disclosing a narrow apartment like a state-room of a steamboat, with two berths, one above the other. This little room was lighted by a lamp in the passageway, the light entering through an open transom over the door.

"Make yourselves comfortable," said Bumstead, in his cheeriest tones. "Put yer wet clothes out at the door, and I'll hang 'em at the fire to dry. Holler fur 'em in the mornin', and you'll git 'em."

CHAPTER V.

IN FOUL HANDS—ASA'S BIG DIVE—FIRE!

"I SAY, Ace," said Snakeroot, when the boys were alone, "this is a queer sort of a shop."

"I don't know what to make of it," replied Sproule.

"But I do. I know all about flatboats and tradin'-boats and all the mud-turtle kind of crafts. Let's take off these wet clothes, and don't leave any money in yer pockets."

The boys stripped off their water-soaked garments, after taking out their valuables, and placed them outside the door.

"Now sit down here on the berth," said Snakeroot, "and I will whisper it to yer. I don't want those chaps to know that we suspect 'em. I decide ag'in' this craft as an honest tradin'-boat fur three good reasons. First, thar ain't a speck of anythin' in sight to trade in, and that sellin' out yarn is too thin a rag to put over my eyes. Secondly, the boat ain't fitted up to do a tradin' business, not by a long chalk. Thirdly, that old chap is partic'lar to give her the name of the Honest Trader, jest because he knows that she ain't nothin' of the sort."

"What do you suppose she is, then, Snakeroot?"

"I suppose she is on the make—jest lyin' around and watchin' fur what she can pick up. The old man and his son, to my notion, are reg'lar river rats."

"What do you think of the boy?" asked Sproule.

"I don't know what to make of him. Queer duck, ain't he? Looks as if he had got into the wrong crowd. But you can bet on what I tell you about the other chaps. They are strictly on the make, and if you've got any money—"

"Money?" said Sproule, showing a wet roll of bills which he had taken from his pocket. "I should think I have got money!"

Snakeroot sighed, as if he considered so much wealth an incumbrance, rather than an advantage.

"Hide it fur to-night," he said. "In the mornin' it will have to take its chances, and I'm afraid they will be mighty slim. We had better turn in now, and to-morrow we will git away from here if we can."

"If we can?" repeated Sproule.

"Those are the words with the bark on. I don't feel like bettin' high on our chances. Good-night."

Snakeroot took the upper berth, giving his companion the lower one, and in a few moments both were sound asleep. The terrible danger which they had escaped, their present doubtful position, and the perils that too obviously awaited them, were nothing to them then. The sleep of youth is a blessed forgetful ess.

In the mornin' they were awakened by the stir in the adjoining apartment, and tumbled out of their beds. They called for their clothes, which were brought in by Jacob Bumstead, who also brought water for washing purposes.

He lingered a moment, as if he had something to say, and finally said it.

"They wasn't all killed aboard of the War Eagle, young fellers. Some of 'em was saved."

"I know that we were saved," said Sproule, "and I hope that many more are as well off."

"Yes, you are well off, young fellers. You was saved and brought aboard the Honest Trader. But others was saved, too."

With that the owner of the Honest Trader disappeared.

"What does the old sinner mean by givin' us that talk?" asked Snakeroot.

"I suppose he merely wanted to tell us the news," replied Sproule.

"I don't want any of his news. I don't fancy his looks or his ways. I don't like the snap of his eye. I wish, Ace, that there was some way of hidin' that money of yours."

"I shall do my best. I mean to put most of it in my stockings, and leave a fair amount in my pocket-book, which may satisfy them if they really mean to rob us."

"That is a good notion," declared Snakeroot. "They may bite at the bait, and that will give you a chance."

Asa Sproule concealed the greater part of his money in his stockings, dividing it fairly between them. He replaced his revolver in his hip-pocket, but the charges had been so damaged by his immersion in the river that it was useless to him.

When the boys were fully dressed, they entered the outer apartment, and at once perceived why old Jacob Bumstead had made to them that singular communication concerning the survivors of the War Eagle.

Seated on a chair, facing them as they entered, was one of the gamblers with whom Asa Sproule had been playing when the explosion occurred, the coarse-featured man who was known as Madden.

Sproule's eyes rested on the gambler with a look of surprise, quite unmixed with satisfaction, and Jacob Bumstead noticed it at once.

"Thought you would be glad to git the news I gave you," said the old sinner. "You see 'twas true. Here is one of your friends turned up, safe and sound."

"I am glad to see you alive, young gentleman," said the gambler, rising.

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Sproule thought he might as well take it.

"Thank you," replied the boy, "and I am glad to see that you were not among the killed. Were many others saved?"

"Some were, but I don't know how many. I know that I am alive, and that is enough for me."

"You remember Col. Thomassieu, the old gentleman who was playing with us. Was he lost?"

"Can't say," replied the gambler. "It was as much as I could do to look out for Number One."

"Let the livin' look out for themselves, is what I say," remarked Bumstead. "I reckon you must be hungry, young feller, and here is your breakfast, smokin'-hot, though we have been afore you with ours."

It was acceptable, although it was composed of nothing but bacon, corn bread, potatoes, and some very muddy coffee. The boys took the seats that were offered them, and did full justice to the meal. Then they were ready to leave the boat.

"If you will tell me how much we owe you, Mr. Bumstead," said Asa Sproule, as he rose and put his hand in his pocket, "I will try to pay you."

"How much did you expect to pay?" asked Bumstead.

"Two or three dollars, perhaps."

"I want more than that."

"How much?"

"All you've got!"

This plain and unconscionable demand caused something like a consternation in a portion of the company. Asa Sproule looked at Asa Scott, and Asa Scott looked at Asa Sproule, and both of them looked at "Deacon" Bumstead, who answered their looks by the usual expressive snapping of his eyes.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Asa Sproule.

"Don't I speak plain enough?" replied the old sinner. "It seems to me that my words are easy to understand. Don't see how I kin make 'em any plainer. All you've got is what I want, and what I mean to have."

"Give him three dollars, Ace, and let's go," said Snakeroot.

"I don't mean to stand any nonsense."

"Do 't you?" sneered Bumstead. "That's jest like me, for I don't mean to stand no nonsense. Don't you, neither, if you kin help yourself; but I don't see how you're goin' to do it. Young feller," he continued, turning to Sproule, "my friend here, Cap'n Madden, tells me he was with you aboard the War Eagle, that you are a young gen'lman of fortune, and that you tote lots of money. If you jest shell out all you've got, maybe I'll give you enough to travel on; but I mean to have it, anyway."

"We were strangers, and you took us in," returned Sproule. "It was bad enough to be blown up, without being robbed."

"Don't use hard words, young feller. Better not rub your nose ag'inst the grin-stun. You ought to be glad to git out of the scrape with your lives. That's more'n some o' 'em did. You've got the world afore you, and a little money ain't to be put alongside o' life."

"But we don't owe our lives to you."

"You will, though, if you ever leave this boat," replied Bumstead, as his eyes snapped more wickedly than ever.

"If that is the sort of a fix we are in," said Sproule, "I suppose there is nothing for us to do but to submit. Here is my pocket-book."

He took the pocket-book from his breast-pocket, and threw it on the table, where the "Deacon's" hand closed on it, instantly.

"May we go now?" he asked.

"Not quite," replied Bumstead. "You must be s'arched. Nathaniel, you and the cap'n attend to that."

The boys submitted to the search, but, nothing of much value was found in their pockets, except Asa Sproule's pistol, which was taken from him.

Jacob Bumstead, in the meantime, was examining the boy's pocket-book, and was evidently disappointed at the result of the examination.

"There's only about eighty dollars," he said. "Is this the rich young feller you was talkin' about, cap'n?"

"He must have more than that," replied Madden.

"He threw his money around like an oil prince."

"Here is a paper that looks to me as if it called for three thousand dollars. Come and take a squint at it, cap'n."

"It's a draft for three thousand," said Madden, as he looked over the old man's shoulder, "or what they call a certificate of deposit, payable to the order of Asa Sproule."

Snakeroot stared at his friend.

"I had forgotten that," whispered Sproule to him; "but they can't use it."

"Now I know what to do," announced Jacob Bumstead. "Young feller called Asa Sproule, jest you write your name on the back of this bit of paper."

"I won't do anything of the kind," spunkily replied Sproule.

"You won't? What's the use o' sayin' you won't, when you've got ter? You don't git off this boat, young feller, till you write your name on that paper, nor till the money is collected on it, neither. Nab him, Nat!"

At the word the younger Bumstead sprang upon Asa Sproule, and so did Madden, and they overpowered and bound him instantly.

Snakeroot had not entered into their calculations; but he had his wits about him, and was expecting some such crisis. As soon as the attention of the Honest Traders was concentrated upon his comrade, he darted out of the forward door of the flatboat, and plunged into the Mississippi.

Nat Bumstead left Asa Sproule to the others, and ran out after Snakeroot.

"Shall I shoot him?" he asked, catching sight of the boy's head as it came to the surface, after a long swim under the swift water, just where a bayou joined the river.

"No!" answered the old man. "It ain't worth while. He ain't no count."

Nat Bumstead could not have shot him if he had tried, as the head no sooner emerged from the water and caught a breath, than it went under again, point up the bayou, and Snakeroot was soon out of reach.

The Honest Traders then concentrated their attention upon Asa Sproule, who was in an uncomfortable condition of body and mind. He was uncomfortable in body, because his arms were tied behind the back of his chair, and the position was by no means a pleasant one. He was uncomfortable in mind, because the precipitate escape of Snakeroot had the appearance of a desertion of his comrade.

"This is what comes of betting on two aces," he thought. "I don't believe that I will be silly enough to do that again."

Subsequent reflection, however, showed him that Snakeroot could be of no service to him as a prisoner on the Honest Trader, and might possibly render him some assistance when he was free.

His own affairs soon occupied his attention, to the exclusion of all other considerations; for it was evident that the Honest Traders were making preparations to compel him to indorse his draft.

The preparations were quite formidable. A poker was thrust into the fire to heat, and a stout pair of pincers was laid on the table.

"That is meant for you, young feller," said Jacob Bumstead. "Are you ready to write your name on that bit of paper?"

"What if I won't do it?" asked Sproule.

"Then we allow to burn them tender hands and feet of yours. If that don't fetch you to time, we mean to pull out your finger-nails."

The boy asked and obtained time to reflect on this alternative. He had a considerable sum concealed in his stockings, and that would be discovered if his feet should be stripped. There was a chance to save it if he should submit. He was also decidedly of the opinion that he might as well spare himself the proposed pain and mutilation. A few weeks ago he would have been willing to undergo considerable suffering for the sake of three thousand dollars; but his ideas had changed since he had come into his unexpected fortune. That sum would hardly be noticed among his many thousands, and he knew that his finger-nails would be sorely missed. It was plain to him that this was an instance in which discretion would be the better part of valor.

"If I indorse the draft," he said, "will you let me go?"

"As soon as we git the money," replied Bumstead.

"Not till then."

"When you let me go, will you give me money enough to take me back to St. Louis?"

"Ya-as—we'll do it."

"If you promise me that, and if you will treat me well while you keep me here, I will indorse the draft."

"All right—it's a bargain."

The boy's hands were untied, and he was allowed to sit at the table and write his name across the back of the draft. He could not help sighing as he did so, but he was convinced that one sigh was better than many groans. Then his hands were again tied, but not so uncomfortably as before.

At noon the Honest Traders ate their dinner, and Sproule was again untied while he joined them. After dinner "Captain" Madden was rowed across the river in the skiff by Nat Bumstead.

"Where has he gone to?" asked Sproule, when he saw Nat returning alone.

"Who gone to?" replied the old man.

"The captain."

"He has gone across the river, to take the keers to St. Louis, to git that money."

"Suppose he should put it into his own pocket, and never come back?"

"He won't do that, young feller. He wouldn't dar' to treat Deacon Jacob Bumstead that way. I've got a hold onto that man, such as keeps him in his place."

Evidently the explosion of the War Eagle had brought to the Honest Traders a congenial companion. It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good.

"Are you not afraid," asked Sproule, after a while, "that this kind of a business transaction may bring you into trouble?"

"What is there to be afraid of?" answered the old sinner.

"The law."

"I allow that thar ain't much law lyin' around loose in this bend of the river."

Asa Sproule passed the afternoon comfortably though by no means pleasantly. He was permitted to sit by the little window and read an old comic almanac and a tattered volume in which were recorded the exploits of John A. Murrell and his gang of river and land pirates; but he was only left alone once, and that was when Nat Bumstead had gone ashore to cut wood, and the old man had gone on deck for a few minutes—if the roof of the flatboat could be called a deck. Then he was not quite alone, his companion being the boy, Tom Brackett.

That boy struck Asa Sproule as being the most quiet and apathetic young chap he had ever met. He spent most of his time seated in a corner, or on what was called the bow of the flatboat. He listlessly did the little that he was told to do, and spoke very seldom. But Sproule perceived that he had bright black eyes, and also noticed that those eyes were occasionally bent upon him with an expression

of admiration, if not of envy. He believed that there might be some spring in the boy's nature that could be touched, and he tried to touch it as soon as he was alone with him.

"Do you want to get away from here, bub, and to be rich?" he asked. "If you do, just let me loose."

"I don't dar' to," whispered the boy, as he wriggled on his bench.

"You shall have a big lot of money if you will do it," persisted Sproule.

"I don't dar' to."

The approach of Jacob Bumstead put a stop to this attempt at bribery; but Sproule noticed that the boy did not report it, and he considered this a good sign.

Darkness closed in upon the flatboat, and supper-time came. After supper the two Bumsteads enjoyed their pipes and a bottle in moody silence, and Asa Sproule was left to his own thoughts. He had arrived at the conclusion that he was not uncomfortable, but that a week's imprisonment on that flatboat would be quite insupportable, when he was startled by a violent pounding at what may be called the stern of the Honest Trader.

"What's that?" exclaimed Jacob Bumstead.

"I'll go and see," said Nat.

He went out at the forward door, and shortly his heavy steps were heard on the roof of the boat. Then his stentorian tones were heard yet more plainly, as he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Pap! come out here quick! The boat's afire!"

Jacob Bumstead jumped up with a savage oath, seized a water-pail and dashed out.

The boy, Tom Brackett, roused into unusual animation by such a startling announcement, uncoiled himself, left his corner, and shambled out after the two Honest Traders.

Asa Sproule found himself alone.

CHAPTER VI.

A BOY'S SHARP MANEUVER—DODGING IN THE BAYOU.

ABOUT thirty yards below the Honest Trader a bayou put out from the river—or emptied into it, according to the stage of water in the river, the sluggish contents of the bayou seeming to have no will of their own in the matter. On the upper, or northern, side of the bayou the land was low, swampy, and frequently overflowed, the Honest Trader being moored against a low bank, just at the termination of the solid ground.

When Snakeroot jumped from the flatboat into the river, he had calculated on becoming a mark for a possible pistol-shot, and therefore he swam under water as long as he could hold his breath, the swift current of the Mississippi aiding him in his endeavor to get well out of the way. When he came to the surface he heard Nat Bumstead's inquiry about shooting, and went under again as soon as he could catch his breath—not because he considered his head a good object to aim at in the uncertain light and at that distance, but because he was unwilling to take any chances.

He was up, however, long enough for his quick eye to take in the situation and tell him that he was at the mouth of the bayou. Therefore he headed into the bayou when he started on his second swim under water.

When he came to the surface the second time, he found himself well inside of the bayou, and quite safe from Nat Bumstead's pistol-practice. He was also out of danger from pursuit, unless they should follow him in a skiff, as the point of land between him and the Honest Trader was covered with water. So he swam leisurely up the bayou until he reached solid ground, when he landed and sat down to rest.

Asa Scott had had but one idea in escaping from the clutches of the Honest Traders, and that was the possibility of assisting his comrade to escape. To this object all his thoughts and movements were now directed.

He was on the edge of a forest of oak and sycamore trees. Before him was the dark and quiet bayou, about a hundred yards wide at that point, reaching off into the country indefinitely with no habitation or sign of occupancy visible on either side. It was possible, of course, that one of the Honest Traders might steal around on the dry ground and attack him from the rear; but he had no fear of that. They had secured the rich Asa, and would not be likely to molest the poor one. Besides, he kept his eyes open, and was not likely to be taken unawares.

He took off his clothes, wrung the water out of them, and put them on again. Then he set his shoes in the sun to dry, and took his position against a tree with the view of giving his clothes a chance to dry. At the same time he held himself in readiness to run into the forest if an enemy should approach on the water side, or to dive into the bayou if the approach was on the land side.

Neither friend nor foe came in sight, on the land side or on the water side. When the boy's clothes were sufficiently dried, he struck into the forest in a northerly direction, and, after walking a short distance, turned to the westward, aiming to reach the Mississippi near where the Honest Trader was moored. In this he was successful, and he found a secluded position, from which he could watch that detestable craft without being observed.

The position of the sun, and the cravings of his appetite both told him when it was noon-time. He was hungry, but he was obliged to remain hungry, because there was no chance to get a dinner in that locality, and because he had resolved to keep an eye on the Honest Trader as long as there was any hope of assisting his friend. He had formed a strong liking for Asa Sproule as soon as he saw him, a liking that was confirmed when he watched Sproule's movements on the War Eagle; they had been

strangely united in a common disaster by the explosion, and subsequent events had drawn them more closely together, until Asa Scott felt that it would be the extremity of baseness to desert his comrade.

He perceived that Madden was rowed across the river in a skiff by Nat Bumstead, and saw Nat return alone. From these facts he arrived at the conclusion that Sproule had been induced to sign the draft, and that Madden had been sent to collect it.

But Sproule surely did not remain on the flatboat of his own free will, and why was he kept there?

On this point, also, Snakeroot guessed rightly, inferring that the Honest Traders feared that the boy, if he should be let loose, might find some means to stop the payment of the draft by telegraph.

The great necessity, therefore, was to secure the release of Asa Sproule, and this matter Snakeroot pondered deeply, without coming to any satisfactory conclusion, except that he could do nothing in that direction while daylight lasted.

He saw Nat Bumstead come ashore and cut an armful of firewood and carry it to the flatboat. Then an idea struck him.

This idea he proceeded at once to act upon. It led him back into the forest, where he searched until he found an old clearing, overgrown with broom sedge, which was as dry as straw. With his pocket knife, of which the Honest Traders had not cared to deprive him, he cut a quantity of this dry stuff, bound it in two bundles, and conveyed it to his hiding-place near the river bank. He then examined the patent metal match-box, which he kept in an inner pocket of his vest, and satisfied himself that its contents had not been injured by the water.

Evidently an act of incendiarism was intended, and the Honest Trader was the intended victim.

The sun went down. Twilight followed, and was succeeded by darkness. Snakeroot was now very hungry. In years past he had often felt the pangs of hunger, but during his steamboating experience he had at least been plentifully fed. Hunger came to him as a new thing, and he found it to be a very unpleasant fact. But he had an engrossing object in view, and could endure a great deal of discomfort.

There was a little window in the forward part of the flatboat, composed of a single pane of glass, through which a light was shining from within. Snakeroot crept as near to the boat as he dared, and saw Asa Sproule seated near the window, and he appeared to be bound. Snakeroot's plan was completed immediately.

He slid softly down the bank, and made sure that the skiff was in its usual place, fastened at the "bow" of the flatboat, and with the oars in their stationary rowlocks, as was the custom with skiffs on the Western rivers. Then he returned to his hiding-place, and brought his two bundles of broom sedge down to the bank.

His point of attack was the space at the "stern" of the Honest Trader, back of the box-like house that was built upon the flat. Here he deposited his bundles of straw, and softly followed them.

A match was taken from the patent match-box, lighted, and applied to the broom sedge. As soon as the straw began to blaze, he kicked vigorously against the resounding wood of the house.

Clearly it was not his object to commit the crime of arson, as he gave the Honest Traders fair warning of the danger that threatened them.

As soon as he had sounded the alarm, he quietly dropped overboard, and let the current take him down to the forward part of the boat, where he caught hold of the gunwale of the skiff, and was pretty well screened from observation, although able to see much of what was going on. He saw Nat Bumstead go out on the roof, followed at brief intervals by his father and Tom Brackett.

Then Snakeroot drew himself quickly up on the flatboat, and stepped into the interior, opening his knife as he went, and holding up a finger to enjoin silence upon Asa Sproule, whom he instantly released by cutting the cord with which his hands were tied.

"Come, Ace," he said, "and be as quiet as a cat."

Both boys passed out of the house, and Asa Sproule, following his comrade's whispered directions, stepped down into the skiff, and seated himself in the stern. Asa Scott jumped in after him, cast off the painter, and seated himself at the oars. With a dextrous pull he headed the skiff away from the flatboat, and then with a long and strong sweep of the oars sent it flying down-stream into the darkness.

So quickly had this maneuver been accomplished, that the fire at the stern of the flatboat was not yet quite extinguished, although it was an easy matter to kick overboard the burning straw and throw water on the deck. The Honest Traders were so amazed and indignant that their attention was not immediately attracted by the sound of the oars; but Nat Bumstead's quick ear soon caught it, and he jumped upon the roof and ran forward.

"The skiff's gone, pap!" he shouted. "Somebody in it!"

"Shoot 'em!" answered the old man, and the report of Nat's pistol instantly followed, as he fired in the direction of the sound.

The bullet hit nothing, and he had no more sound to guide his aim, as Snakeroot had ceased rowing, relying on the swift current to take the skiff out of reach, and on the darkness to conceal it.

At the mouth of the bayou he again picked up the oars, and pulled the skiff away from the river into the dark and sluggish water of the bayou. To make sure that there should be no effectual pursuit from the Honest Trader across the land, though he had little fear of that, he put in his best work as an oarsman for a few minutes, and was careful to keep close to the southern shore of the bayou.

In a little while, feeling quite safe from pursuit, he pulled along more leisurely, and the boys began to talk and compare notes.

"I suppose you thought I had run off and left you in the lurch," said the young water-rat.

"I thought that you had sense enough to save yourself," replied Asa Sproule; "but I never would have thought that you could get me out of the scrape by such a sharp trick as this."

"Won't that old sinner howl when he finds you missing, Ace? Won't they both wonder how it was done and who did it?"

"I would give a pretty to see and hear them for a few minutes. But I know who did it, and I consider you a first-rate fellow, a regular trump."

"Did you sign that paper?" asked Snakeroot.

"Yes; I thought it was cheaper to give in than to have my finger-nails pulled out."

"Jimminy! Was that their game? Hangin' would be too good for 'em. And that gambler was sent off to get the money on it?"

"Yes."

"You can block that game now, I hope."

"I would block it pretty quick," replied Sproule.

"If I could get to a telegraph station. Where are you taking us to now?"

"Don't know. This is a bayou, and I can't say how far it runs into the land. I thought it gave us the best chance to get out of the way. We ought to strike a plantation in here somewhere, and I wish we could do it right soon, for I am powerful hungry."

"Have you had nothing to eat since morning?" asked Sproule.

"Not a bite."

"Poor fellow! That is hard lines for you. But I doubt if you are worse off than I am."

"What's the matter, Ace?"

"I am burning with fever. I had felt it coming on all the afternoon, and it struck me just as I stepped into the skiff. My head is all in a whirl, and I am afraid you will have me helpless on your hands before long."

"Then I must hurry up and try to get somewhere," said Snakeroot, as he began to ply his oars vigorously.

They were now at a considerable distance from the mouth of the bayou, and were approaching a point where it made a bend to the southward. Asa Sproule, who was reclining in the stern, and was the only one who could look ahead, suddenly started up.

"See a light!" he exclaimed. "There is a light yonder!"

Asa Scott turned and looked. A short distance ahead of the boat was a low point of land, running out into the bayou, and near its extremity a small but bright fire was burning. He settled back to his oars, and pulled briskly for a few moments; then he turned and looked again.

"There must be somebody not far from that fire," he said, and again he rowed straight at it.

CHAPTER VII.

"NOBODY IN PARTICULAR."

THE BOY OF THE skiff glided up on the sandy shore, and Asa Scott rose to his feet and looked around. His companion was reclining in the stern, and seemed to be incapable of further exertion.

Nobody was in sight, and there was nothing to be seen on the sandy point but the fire; but that was so bright and fresh that it had evidently been lately fed, and the person who had fed it could not be far away.

Snakeroot stepped ashore, pulled the skiff up so that it could not slide off, and started to explore the locality. He had not taken three steps when he jumped back in amazement, if not in affright.

Suddenly, as if he had risen from the ground, there appeared before him a young man, tall and handsome, with fair hair, bright blue eyes, and a fresh, healthy complexion. He was dressed in a jacket of gray jeans, with trousers of the same, a blue flannel shirt, and a black felt hat. In his right hand he held a short rifle, or carbine. As he stood beyond the fire, his form and features were well defined, and Snakeroot at once perceived that there was no occasion for alarm.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," announced the stranger. "Come on if you want to."

"You startled me," said Snakeroot. "You looked as if you had come out of the ground."

"So I did—out of a hole in the sand, which I had dug to hide me while I watch for deer."

"Do you shoot deer here?" asked Snakeroot, with a boy's sudden interest in the sport.

"They are scarce, but sometimes the light draws them. But who are you, and where are you from?"

"We are two of the survivors of the War Eagle."

"Survivors of the War Eagle!" exclaimed the stranger. "What do you mean? What is the matter with the War Eagle?"

"She blew up last night, a few miles above here."

"Gracious Heaven! Were many lives lost?"

"I suppose so, but I know very little about it, except that we were saved."

"Was there an old gentleman, a passenger on the boat, named Thomassieu?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You say that there are two of you," continued the stranger. "Where is the other?"

"In the skiff. He is very sick with a fever, which came on him to-day, and I want to get him to some house as soon as possible, where he can have a doctor and be taken care of."

"I am something of a doctor, myself. I will look at him."

The stranger stepped into the skiff, and felt Asa Sproule's face and forehead. The fever was now

burning hot, and when the boy was spoken to he answered incoherently.

"He is in a bad way," confessed the stranger, as he stepped back on the shore. "As you say, he must be got to some house as soon as possible. I have a little cabin near here, but that won't do. He must be taken to the plantation."

"Where is that, sir?" asked Snakeroot.

"About a mile up the bayou," replied the stranger.

"Where did you get that skiff?" he added, in a tone of suspicion.

"That is a long story, sir, and I am in a hurry. The explosion of the War Eagle is not the only trouble we have had."

"Very well. Get into the skiff, and support your friend. I will row you to the plantation, and you shall tell me the story as we go along."

Snakeroot seated himself in the stern to take care of his suffering friend, and the stranger shoved off the little craft and pulled it up the bayou like a practiced carman. He drew from the boy without any effort the story of the explosion of the War Eagle and of the adventure on the Honest Trader.

"I suspected that there was something the matter with that flatboat," said the stranger. "I believed that she was there for no good. So you came by the skiff honestly, although it is not yours."

"We came honestly by everything," declared Snakeroot. "We can pay for the skiff if we ought to, and we could buy lots of such skiffs if we wanted to. That is, my friend could."

"He is a young gentleman of property, then, I presume? How is he getting on?"

Asa Sproule's fever was getting worse, and he was apparently unconscious of what was going on about him, and Snakeroot so reported.

"We must get him to the plantation as soon as possible."

"Do you own the plantation, sir?" Snakeroot ventured to ask.

"I? I own nothing. The plantation we are going to belongs to Col. Thomassieu, and that reminds me that I must ask you to say nothing at the house about the explosion. Col. Thomassieu was expecting to come down the river on the War Eagle, and if he is lost, his two daughters—God help them!—are orphans. I wish you could tell me something about him."

Asa Sproule could have told something about Col. Thomassieu, if he had been in a condition to do so; but it was useless to appeal to him when he was devoured by fever.

"What shall I say to the people if they ask me where we came from?" queried Snakeroot.

"I will attend to that," replied the stranger. "The young ladies must be kept in ignorance of the explosion as long as possible, or until I can get some definite news for them. Their father may not have taken passage on the War Eagle, or he may have been saved. I will arrange a story to fit the case. By the way, when you asked me if I owned the plantation we are going to, your question seemed to contain an inquiry as to who I am, and I ought to tell you, lest you might suppose me to be of the same stripe with your friends of the flatboat."

"I would never have supposed that, sir," said Snakeroot.

Indeed, the stranger's speech and manner were sufficient to stamp him as quite a different being from the Bumsteads.

"I must confess," he continued, "that I am nobody in particular. My name is Arthur Westleigh, and I inhabit a little cabin near where you saw my fire. The few people hereabout consider me of no account, because I devote my time to nothing but hunting all sorts of game, from deer down to musketoes."

"Hunting musketoes!" exclaimed Asa Scott.

"Yes, and other insects. I suppose I may call myself a naturalist for lack of another name. It is because of my uncertainty of occupation that Col. Thomassieu has not encouraged me as a visitor at his house; but I am sure that he would not object to my appearance there on such an errand as this. Here we are at the plantation."

Snakeroot looked, but he saw no house, nor anything to indicate the vicinity of a plantation. The night was quite dark, and nothing was visible but a grove of tall trees, until Arthur Westleigh beached the boat on a low and grassy shore. Then the boy looked up through an avenue of trees, and saw some lights that evidently shone through the windows of a house.

Westleigh hailed the house with a voice that was very sonorous and musical, and soon several black people, grown folks and children, of both sexes, came running down to the shore. Evidently an arrival at night was an unusual occurrence at that place.

"Dat you, Massa Westleigh? What's de mattah! Who's dese folks?" were some of the questions that were distinguishable amid a babel of voices.

"Don't stand here chattering," said Westleigh.

"There is a boy in the skiff who is very sick and too weak to walk. Some of you run to the house and bring something to carry him on. Better get one of those settees on the porch, and be in a hurry about it."

Part of the black people ran off at the top of their speed, and soon returned, bringing a light cane settee, a heavy quilt and a pillow. After them came, at a somewhat slower rate of speed, but with sufficient rapidity to show that they were not uninterested, two young ladies, to whom young Westleigh raised his hat respectfully.

Both were brunettes, and one was a beauty. She seemed to be about seventeen, and her most noticeable personal charms were a pair of large dark eyes, masses of raven black hair, a peachy com-

"What a beautiful young girl! A most enchanting smile! A rare gem, at whose age it might not be possible to guess, was by no means distinguished by a common red with the beauty, and was distinguished by a sensible and kindly expression of countenance. Both were plainly dressed, but there were some attractive bits of color in the attire of the younger, which were not visible in that of her sister. "We are glad to see you, Mr. Westleigh," said the elder. "When we heard that you had come, we hoped that you had brought papa home." "Not yet, Miss Thomassieu," answered Westleigh. "I hope to have that pleasure before long." "We are thankful that you have brought yourself, and something to stir us out of our drowsy seats," said the younger, as she advanced, smilingly, and gave her hand to Westleigh. "Laura is already consoled for her disappointment by the prospect of getting a patient to take care of, and is desiring to know what she shall do for your sick friend." "She shall at once be informed, Miss Emma. These are two boys who have been taken down the bayou, and one of them has been taken down with fever. I judge him, by his appearance, to be a young gentleman who is not accustomed to hard ships, and his friend, here, I pronounce the right sort of a fellow. I came across them this evening, and perceived that the sick one must have immediate attention and careful nursing, if he is to recover from this attack, and, therefore, I brought them at once to your hospitable home." "You did right, Mr. Westleigh," said Laura, "and now we will get the patient up to the house at once." With Laura Thomassieu, thought was always quickly followed by action, particularly when she had a chance to do a deed of tenderness and mercy. Asa Sproule was at once lifted out of the boat and comfortably placed on the settee, which was carried by two of the negro men, Laura and Snakeroot walking at its side, while Emma Thomassieu brought up the rear with Arthur Westleigh.

CHAPTER VIII.

SNAKE-ROOT'S MISSION—A SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE.

THE Thomassieu mansion was large, irregular, and mostly one-storied, its various additions serving to indicate the gradual increase of the family in fortune, if not in numbers. It was chiefly noticeable for its many verandas, and for its abundance of light and air—excellent qualities in a Southern residence. The furniture was mostly old, and old-fashioned; but the appointments of the mansion were distinguished by a certain quality of elegance, and by genuine comfort.

Asa Sproule was carried, by the direction of Laura Thomassieu, to a pleasant and airy room on the ground floor, where he was undressed and put to bed. Mr. Westleigh examined him, and pronounced him to be suffering with a raging fever, which threatened to attack his brain.

The boy opened his eyes as soon as this diagnosis was uttered, raised himself in the bed, and called to Asa Scott, who was standing near. Snakeroot seated himself at his side, and took his hand.

"Ace," said he, "I want to say something before I get worse. You must go to St. Louis."

"To stop the payment of that money?" asked Snakeroot.

"Yes; but you will need money."

"I have more than fifty dollars sewed up in my vest."

"That'll do. Wait—I must write something. Give me a chance."

Writing materials were procured, including a music book for a rest, and Snakeroot held the ink while his friend scribbled the following note:

"RICHARD BRASHEAR, Esq., St. Louis: "Don't pay my certificate of deposit. It was taken from me. I am sick with fever. This will be handed to you by Asa Scott, who is my close friend. Believe everything he tells you, and do as you think best. ASA SPROULE."

"Get some clothes for both of us," said Sproule, as he handed this to Snakeroot, and fell back in the bed.

"I don't like to leave you, Ace, while you are so sick," said Snakeroot.

"Never mind that. Go along, and let me rest."

After a brief conference with Arthur Westleigh, Snakeroot went to bed and slept soundly. Early in the morning he was taken in a skiff to the mouth of the bayou, and thence was rowed across the Mississippi, landing at a wood-yard and plantation. A note, which Westleigh had given him, caused him to be supplied with a horse and a guide, and a rather tedious journey finally brought him to a station on the great northern and southern railroad.

He struck a straight course for the telegraph office, and sent this dispatch to Mr. Brashear, at St. Louis:

"Don't pay Asa Sproule's certificate. He was robbed. He is now sick, but in good hands. I am coming right up. ASA SCOTT."

He boarded the first train, and was whirled away toward St. Louis.

The sending of this dispatch was in the highest degree necessary, as Madden, with the stolen certificate, had so much the start of his young pursuer.

Mr. Brashear, however, was vigilant in his way.

While bewailing, in the bosom of his family, the lack of "business sense" that had prevented him from unfairly realizing a fortune by the capture of Asa Sproule's silver stock, he declared his intention of watching over the interests of the young fellow "like a father," as he had already formed a great liking for him.

"It stands to reason," he said to his wife, "that the boy will rush into more or less extravagance

as seems to be a level-headed chap, as boys go, but he is bound to have his fling, be the same more or less, as the lawyers say. I have his autograph, which he left on my signature-book just before he went away, and it is in a fair, steady, round hand, written when he felt free, happy and unexcited. When he draws on me, as he is sure to begin to do before long, I shall watch his signature, and compare it with that in my book. So I will be able to judge of the condition of his mind. If his handwriting shows that he is drinking, or in trouble, I may deem it my duty to inquire into matters before I pay his drafts."

"You think you are mighty smart, you dear old Dick," replied his wife; "but you weren't sharp enough to pick up a fortune when it was thrown at your feet."

"That's a fact, Louisa. I missed that chance."

"And so you would miss a thousand such if you had them, you dear old fraud."

"I am afraid I might. The flesh is willing, but the spirit is weak. But I am inclined to believe that you love me quite as much while we honestly have enough, as you would if we dishonestly had more than we need."

"A million times more, and you know it."

Shortly after this conversation Mr. Brashear received the news of the explosion of the War Eagle. That disaster was telegraphed all over the country, but more extensive and detailed intelligence was naturally sent to St. Louis, where the steamer was owned.

The broker exerted himself to obtain information of the fate of Asa Sproule, but his efforts were quite unsuccessful. The passenger-list had been lost, and nothing could be given to the public but the names of the saved and of those who were known to have been killed or injured. In none of these lists was the name of Asa Sproule to be found, and Mr. Brashear could get no clew to the boy, although he telegraphed his description to several points down the river, and wrote to others which were not accessible by telegraph.

"Missing" was his report to his wife, to whom he detailed his fruitless efforts. "Possibly dead, possibly alive, but surely missing."

"Probably dead, I should say," remarked Mrs. Brashear. "In that event, what will become of his property?"

"I don't know; but I suppose he has some relatives somewhere, and that I must advertise for them—that is, if I should be silly enough to throw away another splendid chance."

"What sort of a chance?"

"The fact is, Louisa, that there was no witness to my transaction with the boy, and his money is deposited in my name, and what is to hinder me from just quietly keeping it?"

"Nothing at all," sarcastically replied his wife. "Nothing in the world—unless it may be a little bit of principle which your reckless and rascally career has left to you."

"Just so. That is what I get for being an old-time Kentucky idiot. I wish I had had somebody to beat some business sense into me when I was a boy."

The broker gazed mournfully at his boots for a few minutes, and then burst out with a triumphant exclamation, as if he had made a very valuable discovery.

"There is something else, Louisa. It is quite likely that the boy has made some acquaintances, to whom he has spoken of his sudden fortune and of the man in whose charge he left it. In that case, it would hardly be safe to run the risk of appropriating the money."

"Hush your nonsense, Richard. You know that you have not seriously thought of such a thing."

"No nonsense about it. There is no telling how far your grasping avariciousness might push me, if I hadn't discovered this legal check. Seriously, my dear, I think there is good reason to hope that young Sproule has not been lost. He may have reached the shore at some out-of-the-way place, and perhaps we will hear from him before long. Boys of his age are mighty hard to kill."

Early that afternoon, when the broker returned to his office from lunch, he found a telegram awaiting him. Hoping that it brought news of Asa Sproule, he tore it open, and hastily read Snakeroot's dispatch from below, and it made him open his eyes.

"So soon!" he mused. "Got into double trouble already! Well, this is jumping into life with a vengeance. Blown up in a steamboat, and then robbed—or, perhaps, robbed and not blown up at all. This is what I may call a pretty brash beginning."

Nobody appeared during business hours to demand payment of the certificate, and when Mr. Brashear went home he communicated the interesting intelligence to his wife.

"If this is the beginning, what will the end be?" he asked. "Anyhow, I am very glad to learn that the young fellow is alive, particularly as it puts an end to your felonious plan, Louisa, of appropriating his fortune."

"My plan!" indignantly exclaimed the old lady. "Richard Brashear, how can you say such a thing?"

"Wasn't it yours, my dear? Well, it is all in the family. Now I want to see the chap who is going to present that certificate. I don't believe he would have fooled old Dick very badly, even if I hadn't got wind of him."

Hardly had the broker reached his office in the morning, when a coarse-featured, flashily-dressed man stepped in.

"Bet that's my bird," muttered the broker, as the stranger inquired for Mr. Brashear.

So it proved to be, and the man introduced him-

self as "Captain Gerald Madden, late of the Confederate army."

"I hold some paper of yours," he said, "which calls for three thousand dollars."

"What sort of paper?" mildly asked the broker.

"A certificate of deposit, drawn in favor of Asa Sproule, and by him duly indorsed to me, Captain Gerald Madden, late of the Confederate army."

"Allow me to see it."

Madden produced the paper, and handed it to the broker, who turned it over and examined the indorsement.

"Is that right?" asked Madden.

"It seems to be."

"The money, then, if you please."

"Don't be in such a hurry, Captain Gerald Madden, late of the Confederate army," replied the broker, with provoking coolness. "As I have not the honor of your acquaintance, you must be identified as the person named in the indorsement."

"Identified!" angrily exclaimed the gambler.

"They don't do business that way in New Orleans. They never question a gentleman's word."

"But St. Louis is not New Orleans, and this business has nothing to do with any gentleman's word. You must bring somebody here who knows you, and with whom I am acquainted."

"I know plenty of people here, but perhaps they don't know you."

"Quite likely," replied the broker.

"You are a cool hand, I must say. Can you name some respectable man with whom you are acquainted?" insolently asked Madden.

"For instance, Captain McDonough, the chief of police. Don't you know him?"

"What do you mean?" replied Madden, as his coarse face suddenly flushed. "Do you want to insult me?"

"Insult you? Why, Captain McDonough is a very fine man, and I am proud of his acquaintance."

"But you mean to insinuate something."

"Do I? You must know more about it, then, than I do. But I don't want to waste words. You must bring some one to identify you, and that is all there is to be said about it."

Madden left the office in a huff, but returned a little before the close of business with a well-known river man who was willing to certify to the fact that he was called Captain Gerald Madden.

"That is well enough so far," said the broker; "but I am not prepared to pay that certificate just now, and you will have to call again in the morning."

"Do you mean to say that you haven't got the money?" angrily asked Madden.

"I mean to say exactly what I have said."

"If you don't pay it now, I will go and have it protested."

"Go along if you want to. That won't do me any harm, and will only make more delay for you. Come in the morning, and the matter will be properly settled."

Madden began to be abusive, but discovered that he was steering on the wrong tack, and sailed off.

In the morning he was again on hand, demanding payment of the certificate, and Mr. Brashear had heard nothing more from Asa Scott.

"Let me look at the paper again," said the broker, and Madden handed it to him, and he compared Asa Sproule's autograph with that on his signature-book.

"Perhaps you can tell me," he said, "whether young Sproule was on the War Eagle when she exploded, and what became of him after the disaster?"

"What has that to do with the payment of my certificate?" Madden demanded.

"A great deal. As I am a sort of a guardian to the young fellow, I naturally want to know if he is safe, and all about him. And that isn't all."

"What more?"

"This signature, though I don't doubt that the boy made it, is not a natural one, and shows that he was in trouble of some kind. I want to know what that trouble was, and how you came by this certificate."

"I came by it honestly, of course. What do you take me for?"

"For a thief!"

It was not Mr. Brashear who uttered this short and sharp sentence; for he showed as much surprise as Madden did, when the three words were spoken by a rough-looking boy who stepped in from the street.

Madden's face flushed redder than ever as he recognized Snakeroot, and then it turned ashy pale.

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

"Mean! You just wait till I call a policeman, and you will see what I mean."

But Madden did not wait for a policeman. Leaving the certificate in the broker's hands, he dashed out at the open doorway, roughly thrusting aside Snakeroot, who stood in his way.

The boy was about to pursue him, when a word from Mr. Brashear caused him to stop.

CHAPTER IX.

SNAKE-ROOT IN CLOVER—SNAKE-ROOT IN A CELL.

"Are you Mr. Richard Brashear?" asked Snakeroot, walking up to the counter as he reluctantly abandoned the pursuit of the fugitive Madden.

"Yes; and you are Asa Scott?"

"That's my name, sir."

"Come into my back room. I want to have a talk with you."

The boy was given a seat in Mr. Brashear's snugery, and the broker looked at him intently.

"You look pretty rough and half-used up," he said.

"Have you had your breakfast?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's right; but you seem to be pretty badly worried, and doubtless you need rest. Now I want to know who you are?"

"My name is Asa Scott, as I told you, and I was a pantry-boy on the War Eagle before she blew up."

"Were you on her when she exploded?"

"Yes, sir, and Asa Sproule and I got ashore together. I had seen him when he went aboard, and had noticed him on the boat."

"Where is he now, and how is he?"

"At Col. Thomassieu's plantation. It is down in Louisiana or Arkansas somewhere, I believe. He is very sick with a fever, and I hated to leave him, though he is with people who will take good care of him. But he wanted me to come up here and stop the payment of that money. Here is a note that he told me to give to you."

Mr. Brashear read the paper carefully.

"I am afraid that the boy was very sick when he wrote this," he said. "Now tell me all about the explosion and everything that happened."

Snakeroot's narrative made the broker open his eyes, and drew from him some expressions that might have shocked his good wife if she had heard them.

"This is a strange story," he said, when the boy had finished his recital.

"Almost too strange to be true," replied Snakeroot. "But it is a fact, for all that. Asa Sproule tells you that you may believe what I say; but if you have any doubts about me, I can refer you to some good men who know me."

"I have no doubts about you. I may not be a very good judge of men, but I claim to be a good judge of boys. You are sure that the man you saw in my office was the same man you met on the flat-boat?"

"No doubt of that, sir. I wish you had let me call a policeman and have him jugged."

"It would hardly have paid," said the broker. "I might easily have had him arrested, but the crime was committed beyond our jurisdiction, and it would have been too much trouble to prosecute him. I am satisfied with getting hold of the paper. Did those folks get all of Asa's money?"

"No, sir. He had tucked most of it into his stockings, and he got away with it."

"But he will need some more, I suppose?"

"I don't know about that, sir, but the last word he said to me was that I must get some clothes for both of us. I have money enough of my own to get what I need, but Asa lost his baggage, and you must send him a new outfit."

"You shall not spend your money, my boy," said the broker. "You have fairly earned an outfit, and much more than that. I will give you an order on a house that will supply you with everything you need, and will charge the cost to Sproule, who will be glad to pay it."

Mr. Brashear wrote an order, and handed it to Snakeroot.

"I suppose you know the place," he said. "Go there and fit yourself out, and don't mind the expense. Then come back to me, and I will take you to dinner."

Snakeroot was not naturally an extravagant lad, and his life of poverty and hard labor had taught him the value of money. He availed himself of the order that had been given him, but in such an economical manner that the bill which he brought to Mr. Brashear's office was so small as to cause that worthy gentleman to open his eyes.

"You have touched it very lightly, my lad," said the broker. "I think you might as well have dipped into the order a little deeper, but you ought to be the best judge of what you want. Anyhow, I am now satisfied, if I wasn't satisfied before, that you are the right sort, and that I can trust you with the money which I want to send to Sproule."

The broker closed his office at an early hour, and took Snakeroot to his house, where he was warmly welcomed by Mrs. Brashear. When that good lady received from her husband the outlines of the boy's adventures, and learned how Snakeroot had rescued his friend from the clutches of the Honest Traders, she took a lively interest in the lad, and fairly overwhelmed him with motherly attentions. When he had eaten an excellent dinner, and had almost forced himself for the sake of complying with Mrs. Brashear's solicitations, she drew out of him every detail of his story, to which she listened with the most intense interest. His account of the attack of fever by which Asa Sproule had been prostrated, and of his recovery at the Thomassieu mansion, affected her to tears, though she soon recovered sufficiently to inquire with great particularity concerning the personal appearance of the ladies.

"If the poor boy had not been got off of that horrid trading boat," she said, "he would surely have died, and I am afraid that he is not much better off now, in that swampy locality, and with no good physician near."

Snakeroot protested that in his opinion Asa Sproule was very well situated; that the Thomassieu place was not swampy; that the ladies seemed to take a great interest in him; that he would have the best of nursing and every possible comfort, and that the services of a physician would probably be secured.

"There can be no doubt of that," said Mr. Brashear. "The place is in southern Arkansas, I believe, and there are some very good people in that region. That is, when they are good they are very good, and when they are bad they are hateful. Those old-time planters can be depended on for hospitality, anyhow. The name of Thomassieu is familiar to me. I wonder if it can be the same man. Did you say that he was called Colonel Thomassieu, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are so many colonels. I suppose that I would be known as Colonel Dick Brashear, if I lived in a country town. But Thomassieu is an unusual name, and the gentleman was supposed to be a passenger on the War Eagle. There was a Colonel Thomassieu in St. Louis a little while ago, and became acquainted with him in a business way. He wanted to raise some money on his land, but was not able to show a good enough title. It seems that he had fallen in business some time ago, and was heavily in debt. To save the property from being seized for his debts, his father by will left it to his eldest son, giving him only a life estate. But that son mysteriously disappeared while he was quite a small boy, and is supposed to be dead. Therefore, Col. Thomassieu claimed that the estate reverted to him, and that he had a good title, as he had gone through bankruptcy. Perhaps he had, but I couldn't see my way clear to raising any money for him. This Col. Thomassieu was an oldish man, getting along in years, as I may say, and none too level-headed, rather too flighty for a business man."

Asa Scott could not say whether the Col. Thomassieu of Mr. Brashear's acquaintance was identical with the one who was presumed to be a passenger on the War Eagle; but of one thing he was certain, and that was that he was anxious to return to his friend, and intended to take the first train South for that purpose.

As this was a laudable resolve, no objection was made to it, and, after an early tea, Snakeroot set out for the depot, carrying a large satchel. He was also provided with a pocket-book, containing a sum of money which Mr. Brashear wished to send to Asa Sproule.

He had covered the greater part of the distance between Mr. Brashear's house and the depot, when he was overtaken by two men, one of whom was a policeman, and the other was "Captain Gerald Madden, late of the Confederate army."

"That is the boy," said Madden.

"You are my prisoner," said the policeman, as he laid his hand on Snakeroot's shoulder.

"What is the matter?" indignantly asked Snakeroot.

"What are you arresting me for?"

"This gentleman says that you stole his pocket-book," replied the policeman.

"That gentleman? He is no gentleman. He is a thief and a swindler. He robbed a friend of mine down the river, and he tried to swindle a broker on Third street out of three thousand dollars. I want you to arrest him, and I will prove what I have said."

"You've got the cheek of a mule, young chap," said the officer, "but you can't get out of it in that way. This gentleman has sworn out a warrant against you, and all I've got to do is to take you in."

"Then he has sworn to a lie, and I can prove it," protested Snakeroot.

"Suppose you search him," said Madden. "He is trying to get out of town, and perhaps my property is in his pocket."

A brief search brought out the pocket-book that contained Asa Sproule's money.

"That's it!" exclaimed Madden. "That's the very pocket-book he stole from me. Now, you young rascal, we've got you dead to rights. Give me my pocket-book, officer."

To this the policeman demurred, saying that the property must be taken to the station with the prisoner, and produced in the Police Court in the morning.

"All right," said Madden, "so long as it's safe. I will be on hand in the morning, to prove my property and claim it."

Asa Scott begged that he might be taken back to Mr. Brashear's, to establish his identity and his innocence; but the policeman said that he had nothing to do with the matter but to obey orders and arrest him, and marched him off accordingly.

Madden walked off in another direction, after assuring the officer that he would appear at the police court in the morning to prove his charge.

When Snakeroot was questioned and searched at the police station, he told his story, and requested that Mr. Brashear might be sent for, and a messenger was dispatched for that gentleman. Then the boy was introduced to a prison cell for the first time in the course of his varied and rough experience; but he had not been there long when he was brought out to meet Mr. Brashear.

That gentleman corroborated the boy's story in every particular, and offered to give bail for his appearance at court; but the officer in charge was not authorized to accept bail, and could not release a prisoner who was held under a warrant that had been duly sworn out. As nothing else could be done at that hour, Snakeroot was obliged to spend the night in a cell; but he said that that would not worry him much, as he was innocent of any crime.

In the morning all the parties in interest appeared in the police court, with the exception of "Captain Gerald Madden, late of the Confederate army," who did not come forward to sustain his charge. Asa Scott, having been vouched for by Mr. Brashear, was taken home by that gentleman, to receive the sympathy and consolation of his wife.

"I've lost a day," said Snakeroot, "and it worries me to be away from my sick friend; but it's a fact that I am more puzzled than mad about this business."

"Just so with me," said Mr. Brashear. "What can have been the motive of that scoundrel in making a false charge against you? It may have been a piece of spite work."

"Yes, sir, and it may have been something more than that. He may have wanted to have me locked up for the night, so that he could get a day's start of me, though I can't guess why he should want it. But I am sure of one thing—if I ever come across

that red-headed thief and swindler again, I mean to try my best to get even with him."

"Take care of yourself, my boy," warned the broker, "and don't run into any scrapes that you can keep out of."

"That reminds me, Mr. Brashear, of something that Asa Sproule and I may need. We ought to have a pistol apiece."

"You shall have them, my boy, but you must not show them in this city."

Asa Scott again bid his friends good-by, and was accompanied to the depot by Mr. Brashear, when he took the evening train southward. His baggage was increased by the addition of two revolvers and a good supply of cartridges.

CHAPTER X.

BULLETS ON THE BAYOU—THE GOOD SAMARITANS.

ASA SCOTT'S trip southward by rail was uneventful. It worried him considerably to feel that his return to his friend had been delayed an entire day, and he wondered for what purpose the man who styled himself Captain Madden had caused him to be arrested and imprisoned. It seemed quite unlikely that he would commit the crime of perjury merely for the sake of such a little piece of spite; but what other and stronger motive could he have had? The more Snakeroot thought of that affair, the more it puzzled him.

No motive developed itself during his journey by rail. He safely reached the station from which he had telegraphed to Mr. Brashear, and engaged a conveyance to take him to the river. Before starting he took one of the revolvers from his satchel, loaded it carefully, and placed it in his hip pocket. At the river he engaged a man to set him across in a skiff and take him to Col. Thomassieu's place.

The sun was setting when he entered the skiff, and when he reached the other side it was near dusk. He noticed that the Honest Trader had not been moved from the place she occupied when he last saw her, but perceived nothing about her to indicate that she was still inhabited. He directed the oarsman to row up the bayou, keeping pretty well to the south side, and he sat up in the stern to pilot the craft.

The skiff had reached a position opposite to the point of firm ground on which Snakeroot had landed after his swim, when the crack of a rifle was heard from the north side of the bayou, and the boy was aware of a bullet that whizzed by his head, and struck the water at a little distance from the skiff.

He turned his head in the direction from which the shot had come, and saw a little wreath of smoke rising on the north shore. The next moment there was the crack of a rifle from the south shore, followed by a cry of pain or anger, and by the noise of a person breaking his way through the bushes. Then there came the hall of a manly and musical voice from the left:

"Hallo-o! Is that you, Asa Scott?"

"Ay, ay! Is that you, Mr. Westleigh?"

"Yes. Come ashore and take me in."

The skiff was brought to the shore, where Arthur Westleigh was seen in the act of putting another cartridge in his rifle. He stepped into the skiff, which was again headed up the bayou.

"How is Asa Sproule?" was Snakeroot's first question.

"He is very sick," answered Westleigh, "but not dangerously so, as I hope and believe. Dr. Dechler, of Bucksport, has been called in, and he speaks very encouragingly of the case. Did you know that you were shot at?"

"Bet your sweet life that I did. It seemed as if that bullet didn't miss my head by more than an inch. The second shot came from you, I reckon?"

"Yes. I am not in the habit of hunting my fellow-men, but I had to enter a protest against the hunting of my friends. I happened to be down this way and saw a skiff crossing the river. I guessed that you were in the skiff, and when it entered the bayou I saw that my guess had been a good one. When the bullet struck the water, I knew that it was intended for you, and, on the impulse of the moment, I raised my rifle, and fired at the spot from which the shot had come. I don't know whether I hit the fellow or not, but am sure that I scattered him. The question is, now, why did that scoundrel shoot at you?"

By way of answer to this conundrum, Snakeroot related his adventures in St. Louis, closing with an explanation of the manner in which he was delayed by being arrested on a false charge.

"There can be no doubt," suggested Westleigh, "that the shot was fired either by Madden, or by one of the Honest Traders."

"Yes, sir, and it now looks to me as if that rascally Madden had wanted to hold me over in St. Louis a day, so that he could get down here ahead of me and arrange for this bit of business. But why did he want to have me shot? That is what puzzles me."

"The most reasonable supposition is that he and the Honest Traders have a plot of some sort against your friend Sproule, and that they thought it necessary to put you out of the way, to keep you from interfering with their plans. They had a taste of your quality when you got Sproule away from them, and when you stopped the payment of that money in St. Louis, and they hate you, if they do not fear you."

"They will have better cause to hate me if they keep on!" said Snakeroot. "But I don't see what harm they can do to Ace now, and when he gets well they had better steer clear of us."

Mr. Westleigh warned Snakeroot that he would find the people at the Thomassieu mansion in distress. News of the loss of the War Eagle had reached that secluded spot, and an anxious inquiry had ensued. The ladies were not certain that Col. Thomassieu had been a passenger on the boat, but

knew that he had expected to be, and the news of the explosion, coupled with the non-arrival, almost convinced them that he was lost. They had received their mail from Bucksport, including some newspapers that contained full accounts of the disaster, with lists of those who were known to be lost and those who were known to be saved. In neither list did they find the name of Col. Thomassieu, nor was he mentioned in any of the accounts. Westleigh had been compelled to confess the well intended deception he had practiced, and to inform the ladies that the two boys whom he had brought to the house were survivors of the War Eagle disaster. He told their story as he had received it from Snakeroot, but only succeeded in increasing the prevailing anxiety. It was impossible to extract any information from Asa Sproule, as he was scarcely conscious, and the physician had ordered that he should neither talk or be talked to.

Snakeroot was told how anxious the ladies were to see him and learn from his own lips the particulars of the explosion, and he discovered, as soon as he reached the house, that their anxiety had not been overrated. They could hardly wait to answer his inquiries concerning Asa Sproule before they eagerly began to question him about the explosion, and to ask him whether Col. Thomassieu had been a passenger on the War Eagle.

The boy told his story, with all the details that had come under his observation; but it amounted to little more than an account of the individual experiences of himself and Asa Sproule, and he was obliged to admit that he knew nothing about Col. Thomassieu, and very little about any of the other passengers. His friend, who had been a cabin passenger, would probably know more about the matter than he knew; but he was just then in no condition to answer questions.

"Tell all you know, my boy," urged Arthur Westleigh. "Anything would be preferable to this suspense."

"If the ladies will tell me what sort of a looking man he was," said Snakeroot, "I can say whether I have seen him."

A description of Col. Thomassieu was furnished by the joint efforts of his two daughters, and his photograph was shown to the boy, who admitted that he had seen on the War Eagle, previous to the explosion, a gentleman who answered to the description and the photograph.

"It was my poor, dear father!" exclaimed Emma. "He is dead. We will never see him again, and now we are orphans and helpless."

"I am sure that we are not helpless while I live," stoutly replied Laura.

"My abilities, such as they are, are entirely at your service," said Arthur Westleigh, "and I will be only too glad to prove the sincerity of my devotion."

Snakeroot recalled the conversation he had had in St. Louis with Mr. Brashear concerning Col. Thomassieu, and repeated, as well as he could, what that gentleman had said about him.

"This is news to us, and it is very interesting," said Laura Thomassieu. "I know that father has lately spoken to us about economy, though he never tried to practise it, poor dear; but neither of us had any reason to suppose that he was embarrassed to the extent of needing to borrow money; nor did either of us imagine that there was any doubt of his title to this property. The son of whom Mr. Brashear spoke was our little brother, Martin, who was lost some twelve years ago. We only knew that he was missing, and no sign or trace of him could be found, after the most thorough search. We could only suppose that he had fallen into the water and was drowned, and that his body had been carried away by the current."

"Since little Martin is dead," said Emma, "and papa is dead, to whom does this property now belong?"

"I am no lawyer," answered Westleigh, "but I suppose it belongs to Miss Laura and Miss Emma Thomassieu, as the natural heirs of both their father and their brother—that is, if Col. Thomassieu is dead."

Snakeroot stoutly contended that the old gentleman might yet be in the land of the living. He and Asa Sproule had escaped, and they knew of another who had got ashore as they did. The newspapers gave the names of a number of the saved, and neither his name, nor Asa Sproule's, nor Madden's, was in any of the lists. Why might not Col. Thomassieu have escaped with his life, as they did?

"You were young and active," replied Laura. "My father, although he did not consider himself an old man, was getting on in years, and was growing feeble. Besides, if he was alive, he would have come home."

"He may have been hurt, so that he can't travel," suggested Snakeroot.

In that event, Laura insisted, he would have written, or employed some person to write for him. The ladies could not be comforted, and the boy felt that he had little faith in his own arguments.

After supper he went to visit his sick friend. Although he stole into the room on tip-toe, and Asa Sproule seemed to be sleeping, the latter opened his eyes and smiled. He put out his hand when Asa Scott seated himself by the bed, and feebly pressed the hand that was given.

"It is all right," whispered Snakeroot, wishing to inform his friend of the result of his trip to St. Louis, and Sproule closed his eyes, and no more conversation was permitted.

Asa Scott wished to sit up with his friend, but was told that he had the best of attendance, and that he had better consult his own health and comfort by going to bed. He slept soundly, and in the morning

felt fresh and vigorous enough for an expedition concerning which he and Arthur Westleigh had already consulted.

CHAPTER XI.

A REFUGEE FROM THE "HONEST TRADER"—LAURA THOMASSIEU'S NEW CHARGE.

THE expedition concerning which Arthur Westleigh and Asa Scott had consulted was one of observation. They had agreed that the piratical craft known as the Honest Trader must be cleared away from the vicinity, although it might not be possible to punish her rascally crew as they deserved, and Westleigh proposed to procure some sort of a legal process from Bucksport, or to enlist the neighboring planters in a crusade against the Bumsteads. But it was determined, in the first place, to make a reconnaissance, in order to fix the exact location of the flatboat, and to ascertain, if possible, the number of its occupants.

With this purpose Westleigh and his young ally set forth directly after breakfast. The former was armed with the short gun already mentioned, which proved to be a seven-chambered repeating rifle, and Snakeroot was provided with a hunting rifle from Col. Thomassieu's stock of weapons. A new acquaintance made his appearance in the form of a large and handsome dog, a cross of wolf-hound and mastiff, the property of Westleigh. This animal, which answered to the name of Bismarck, was a formidable addition to the party, and Snakeroot regarded him with great respect and admiration.

North of the Thomassieu mansion, after crossing a large cotton-field, the ground was heavily timbered, and rose gradually, until the rise culminated in what was there called a ridge, though in a hilly country it would be considered a mere swell of the land. Westleigh, whose pursuits had made him acquainted with every inch of the region, said that the ridge trended toward the river, terminating at the point where he supposed the flatboat to be located.

The reconnoitering party followed this ridge in a westerly direction, until they came in sight of the river, when they proceeded slowly and cautiously, keeping a bright look-out for the flatboat and the Bumsteads.

At last it became evident that their caution was uncalled for. They reached the river, but the flatboat was not visible. They looked up and down the bank, but could see nothing of the "Honest Trader." Yet it was easy to decide that she had been moored there, and the adjoining ground and timber bore plentiful evidence of the recent presence of the Bumsteads.

"They have taken the hint that your shot gave them, Mr. Westleigh," said Snakeroot, "and have pulled up stakes."

"I suppose you are right. That shot taught them that you have friends about here, and they have thought it best to decamp. But I am inclined to believe that they are not far away."

"If we should go down the river and look for them, perhaps we might find them."

"Perhaps we might," replied Westleigh, "but I am not disposed to hunt them. If they will leave us alone hereafter, we can afford to leave them alone."

The fact of the departure of the "Honest Trader" being settled, the mission of the reconnoitering party was ended, and they set out to return. They had not gone far when they heard the deep barking of Bismarck, who was trotting ahead, followed by a cry of terror.

Westleigh called the dog, and he and Asa Scott ran in the direction from which the sound proceeded. Bismarck, who came back to them, led them to a large tree, from behind which stepped out a boy, none other than the pale-faced and dark-eyed youth whom the two Asas had met on the "Honest Trader," and whom they knew as Tom Brackett. He was paler than ever, the result of hunger and exposure, and the "hunted" expression of his countenance had visibly deepened.

"Please don't let that dog hurt me!" he implored, as he stepped out from behind the tree.

"Nothing shall hurt you, my boy," said Westleigh. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"I am Tom Brackett—that boy knows me—and I've run away."

Asa Scott told Westleigh in a few words the little that he knew about the boy, and Westleigh asked him what had become of the flatboat, and why he had run away from her.

"She went away last night, but I had run off before she left," replied the boy, sliding up to Snakeroot as if he expected protection and friendship from him. "I hid in the woods, and heard them cuss fearful when they were tryin' to find me. I ran away because I was tired of bein' beat and kicked about, and because I had seen this boy and t'other one, and wanted to find them and go with them. Please take me somewhere, and take care of me, and give me somethin' to eat. I don't care if you take me to jail, so as you give me somethin' to eat."

"Come with us, my boy, and you shall at least have enough to eat," encouraged Westleigh.

This new arrival was quite a surprise to the household at the Thomassieu mansion; but the sympathies of the ladies were aroused by the story that was told them, and they were also disposed to admire the large dark eyes and the really fine features of the young refugee. When he had finished a substantial meal, to which he did ample justice, he was overwhelmed with questions concerning himself, not only from the naturally inquisitive portion of the household, but from Arthur Westleigh and Asa Scott.

His story, condensed from the questions and answers, was brief and somewhat unsatisfactory. His

name was Tom Brackett. He had no father or mother that he knew of. It sometimes seemed to him that he had once had a father and a mother; but when he tried to remember them he got nothing from the effort. He had an uncle who was known as Major Brackett, and whom he supposed to be a rich man—at least, he always seemed to have plenty of money. Tom had spent the greater part of his life, as far as he knew, in Indiana, where his uncle had sent him to school, boarding him with some people who fed him poorly and treated him badly. It was then about three years since he had been taken from school by Jacob Bumstead, who had thereafter kept possession of him, most of the time on trading boats, and part of the time on shore at one place and another. He had been badly treated by the Bumsteads, who compelled him to do menial work, and were in the habit of beating and kicking him. On the evening of Snakeroot's return, Madden was on board of the "Honest Trader," having arrived the previous night, and he and Nat Bumstead went down to the bayou, the latter carrying his rifle. In the course of an hour or so Jacob Bumstead, who was on the roof, listening, said that he heard two shots, and expressed his surprise. After a while Nat Bumstead and Madden came back to the boat, the former with a handkerchief tied around his leg, where he had received a slight flesh-wound. The three men talked loudly and cursed, and then had a consultation in connection with a bottle of whisky. Jacob Bumstead said that it might soon be too hot for them there, and they had better move away. Madden objected, but the two Bumsteads outvoted him. Tom said that he then overheard them talking about himself, and disputing whether it would not be best to "put him out of the way." As he was frightened by this expression, whose meaning he had reason to know, he quietly slipped ashore, and ran away and hid in the woods. He heard the Bumsteads searching for him, and climbed a tree, believing that they would not look for him in that direction. When he no longer heard them, and when he was quite tired and sleepy, he came down and stole to the bank of the river. Perceiving that the "Honest Trader" was no longer there, he stretched himself on the ground and went to sleep. After he awoke he wandered about, feeling hungry and lonesome and lost, until he was found by Bismarck.

Such was the boy's story. Meager as were its details, it deeply interested the ladies, but there was a doubtful look on Arthur Westleigh's face.

"It seems to me," said that gentleman, "that the ties which bind us to that rascally flatboat are being drawn closer. I hope that this last development may bring no bad luck."

"How could it bring bad luck?" asked Laura Thomassieu.

"Suppose that those rascals had purposely left this boy behind when they went away, expecting that he would be received in this house and thus be useful to their plans?"

Tears started in the boy's eyes as he listened to this harsh suspicion, and Laura Thomassieu became indignant.

"You have no right to make such a cruel charge, Mr. Westleigh," she said. "This poor boy is a waif and a stray. He has been sent to us by God, and, as we deal with him, so will our Father do unto us."

"I sincerely hope that you may be right," said Westleigh, earnestly.

"I hope I may never fear that I am wrong," she answered, "when I am doing a deed of mercy."

Laura took charge of the young refugee, and, with the assistance of a colored seamstress, fashioned for him some decent clothes from one of Col. Thomassieu's suits. Under the redeeming influences of rest, kind treatment, and proper and plentiful food, the color soon began to come into his cheeks, and when he was neatly dressed he was seen to be a really handsome young fellow. Removed from the evil influences of the Bumsteads, and from their rude talk, his natural intelligence and the effects of his early education began to manifest themselves, and none of his new friends had cause to be ashamed of him. Affectionate and obliging, and deeply grateful for what was done for him, he won the favor of all on the place, white and black.

The day after Snakeroot's arrival from St. Louis Asa Sproule's fever "took a turn," as his colored nurse expressed it, and from that time his health improved rapidly. Asa Scott wrote to Mr. Brashear, informing him of this favorable change, and Sproule followed up that letter with one of his own in a few days, when he was able to sit up and even to walk about the house. His convalescence progressed at such a rate that he and Snakeroot were already making calculations on continuing their journey to New Orleans, when an event occurred which changed the current of their thoughts.

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE—A NEW FOE.

ONE sunny afternoon Asa Sproule was seated in the pleasant parlor, where all the family, as the Thomassieus and their guests may be styled, were collected. Laura was busily employed with her sewing. Emma was seated at the piano, and Arthur Westleigh, who then had a room in the house and was making himself useful to the ladies in the management of the plantation, was near her. Asa Scott was conversing with Asa Sproule; while Tom Brackett, who had come to be known as Tommy, was poring over a book in a corner.

A buggy, in which was one man, approached the house on the north side, coming through the lane between the cotton-fields and the garden. Asa Sproule, who was at a window on that side of the house, no sooner caught sight of the occupant of

the buggy than he turned from the window excitedly.

"Miss Thomassieu," he said, "please request Tommy to go to his room immediately, and tell him that he must not stir from there until he is called. I have a good reason for this."

"Do as Mr. Sproule says, Tommy," ordered Laura. "Go to your room at once, and remain there."

The boy arose and left the parlor. Laura Thomassieu's lightest word was law to him.

"I have told you," said Sproule, "that I met on the War Eagle a man who was known as Major Brackett. When I saw Tommy Brackett on the flat-boat his name recalled that of the other. We have since learned that he has an uncle named Major Brackett. The Major Brackett whom I met on the War Eagle is now coming to this house. As he may be Tommy's uncle, I thought it best that the boy should be out of sight until we learn what he wants."

"That is quite right," declared Laura, "and I am glad to see you so thoughtful."

The buggy was driven around to the front of the house, and in a few minutes the colored servant announced Major Brackett, who wished to see the Misses Thomassieu.

"Bring him in," and the visitor was ushered into the parlor.

It was not surprising that Asa Sproule had recognized him at a distance, as he was a noticeable man—tall, handsome, and of a really distinguished appearance. His age might have been forty-five, although he looked younger, and there were no gray lines in his black hair or mustache. As he entered the room his demeanor was gentlemanly and respectful, with a tinge of sadness in his expression.

Laura rose as he entered, and motioned him to a chair.

"I perceive that I am not entirely unacquainted here," he said, as he seated himself. "I see a young gentleman whom I had the honor of meeting on the ill-fated steamer War Eagle. I was rejoiced to learn that he had escaped, and hope that he has recovered from his illness."

"I am getting quite strong, I thank you," politely replied Sproule.

"My errand here is a sad one," continued Major Brackett, addressing himself to Laura. "I presume that you have heard, Miss Thomassieu, of the death of your father."

"We know that he was a passenger on the War Eagle, and that he is missing," replied Laura. "We have mourned him as dead. Can you give us any positive information of his fate?"

"It grieves me that I am able to do so," said the visitor, with a deeper tinge of sadness in his tone. "I was with Col. Thomassieu at the time of the explosion, and escaped from the cabin a little in advance of him. Soon afterward I saw him near me at the bow of the boat, when the fire was rapidly gaining headway. He was about to jump overboard, and I restrained him, begging him to wait until I could launch an empty dry-goods box that happened to be there. But he had been scalded, and the pain of his wounds, added to the terror of the flames, drove him frantic. He broke from me, and plunged into the water, on the wrong side of the boat. The current immediately sucked him under the hull, and I saw him no more. There can be no sort of doubt that he was drowned at that moment; but I have the satisfaction of knowing that I tried to save him."

Laura Thomassieu put her handkerchief to her eyes, and Emma buried her face in her hands. This final confirmation of their fears renewed their grief, and they could not restrain their tears.

"My errand is not finished," said Major Brackett after waiting a little while for the emotion to subside. "I am obliged to call your attention to a matter of business, which I am afraid will prove an unpleasant subject to you. I have been acquainted with your father, Miss Thomassieu, during a number of years, and have had business transactions with him. Doubtless you have often heard him speak of me."

"To the best of my knowledge and recollection he has never mentioned your name," answered Laura.

"Indeed! He must have been very reticent in his family circle concerning his business affairs. You must have known that for some time this plantation has not been paying a profit, and that he has been embarrassed in money matters."

"That is news to me," answered Laura.

"He seemed to make no secret of his embarrassments, Miss Thomassieu. I have loaned him money at various times, and the sum of those loans amounted, up to a recent date, to about thirty thousand dollars."

"Thirty thousand dollars!" exclaimed Laura. It was then her turn to be surprised, and she did not attempt to conceal her astonishment.

"That was about the figure when I met him in St. Louis a short time ago," continued Major Brackett. "He then told me that he had been endeavoring to raise money on his plantation, but had not succeeded, and he applied to me for another loan, promising me a mortgage on his landed property for the full amount of my advances. I hesitated, but finally consented to accommodate him. I let him have about ten thousand dollars, and he gave me a mortgage on this place for forty thousand."

"A mortgage on our home!" exclaimed Laura. "A mortgage for forty thousand dollars, and we have known nothing of it! This is incredible."

"Nevertheless it is strictly true. Here is the document, and any one present who wishes to see it may do so."

Major Brackett took from his pocket a folded paper, and handed it to Arthur Westleigh, who expressed a desire to see it. It was evidently a valid mortgage for the amount mentioned. The signature was pronounced by both Laura and Emma to be the

signature of their father. It was duly signed, sealed, witnessed, acknowledged, and recorded in the county in which the land was located.

"I am no lawyer," said Westleigh, as he handed the paper back to its owner; "but that mortgage seems to me to be correct, difficult as it is to believe that Col. Thomassieu would involve his estate so deeply without consulting or informing his family. But it is ruinous. If it should be enforced now, at this time of depression, it would sweep away the entire property, although the plantation is fairly worth more than the amount of the mortgage."

"I am not disposed," said Major Brackett, "to give anybody any trouble that can possibly be avoided. The mortgage has five years to run, Miss Thomassieu, and the interest, at ten per cent., is payable quarterly. As long as you can meet the interest there is no danger that you will be discommoded."

"That would be simply impossible," calmly replied Laura. "We could not pay one-fourth of four thousand dollars a year, and keep up the plantation. If it could not be made to pay a profit under my father's control, what better could be looked for under the management of my sister and myself? You need not expect, sir, that we will pay the interest or any part of it."

"If that should prove to be the case, Miss Thomassieu, I will be obliged to foreclose the mortgage, and then the property must be sold for what it will fetch."

"Very well, sir. It is nothing but ruin in any event, and the sooner my sister and I know the worst, the better it will be for us."

"For my part," spoke up Asa Sproule, "I am convinced that there is something wrong about this business, and I mean to employ a lawyer to look into it. You need not be troubled, Miss Thomassieu. If this property is ever sold at auction, I will buy it in for you."

Asa Sproule, who could scarcely have called forty cents his own a month ago, spoke of spending forty thousand dollars as if it were a mere trifle.

"Such a wise and wealthy young gentleman," said Major Brackett, "who can treat so lightly the purchase of such a property as this, must be a personage of great importance on the plantation. But perhaps he is not quite as important as he imagines himself to be."

The sneer that accompanied this remark was provoking enough, but Sproule took no notice of it, only saying that he was able to make his words good.

"There is another matter which I must bring to your attention, Miss Thomassieu," said Major Brackett. "You have harbored here a runaway nephew of mine, a boy named Tom Brackett?"

"How do you know that?" demanded Laura, spiritedly.

"That is neither here nor there. News travels faster in such a neighborhood as this than some suppose. It is enough that I know he is here, and I must request you to give him up to me."

"That I cannot do. He fled from some vile men who were ill-treating him and leading him to destruction, and he shall have a home here as long as I can give it to him."

"He was apprenticed to a poor but worthy man, who has bound himself to care for him until he is twenty-one."

"Apprenticed to what?" indignantly asked Snake-root. "To robbery and murder. Those river rats would never teach him anything else."

"As I was not speaking to that young person," rejoined Major Brackett, "I will not notice his impertinent interruption. You must be aware, Miss Thomassieu, that I am the natural guardian of my nephew, and that the law will compel you to give him up to me."

"Perhaps so, but I will not give him up until I am compelled to."

The unwelcome visitor arose, took his hat, and moved toward the door.

"It seems that you are resolved upon war," he said. "I prefer peace, and am sorry that you do not agree with me. I wish you all good-day, and hope to find you hereafter in a more reasonable frame of mind."

He bowed politely, left the house, entered his buggy, and drove away.

When he had gone every one appeared to breathe more freely, with the exception of Arthur Westleigh.

"As I have already remarked," said that gentleman, "the ties which bind us to that rascally flat boat are drawing closer."

CHAPTER XIII. FASCINATING FLORA.

AFTER the departure of Major Brackett there was a long and earnest consultation at the Thomassieu mansion, in which all the members of "the family" joined.

It was unanimously agreed that there could no longer be the least doubt of the death of Col. Thomassieu. It was also agreed that Tommy Brackett should not be given up, except upon compulsion, as he strenuously objected to being surrendered to his uncle, who, as he believed, would surely return him to the custody of the Bumsteads. It was also agreed, in consideration of the statements made by Mr. Brashear to Asa Scott, that Major Brackett's account of his transactions with Col. Thomassieu was probably true, and that his mortgage was genuine and valid. From this last conclusion Asa Sproule dissented, although he could give no substantial reason in support of his dissent, and proposed the employment of all possible legal efforts to defeat the claim.

Laura Thomassieu was of the opinion that she

had better have some further advice, and proposed to send to Judge Dalby, whose plantation adjoined the Thomassieu property, and who had been a particular friend of her father's, requesting him to call and consult with her on the matter. Accordingly a messenger was sent to him, and he answered the call the next day.

Judge Dalby had once been a county judge, from which office he had gained his title; but he made no pretensions to legal knowledge, and was accustomed to say that he was a judge of nothing but good liquor. He was a hearty and jolly middle-aged gentleman, the main object of whose existence seemed to be to take his ease and enjoy life.

With him came his daughter, Flora Dalby, a handsome, merry, black-eyed hoyden of sixteen, full of life and fond of motion, who immediately developed a high degree of sympathy for that interesting convalescent, Asa Sproule. She had hardly been in the house half an hour when she had convinced that young gentleman that he only needed air and exercise to give him strength and bring the color to his cheeks, and had proposed that she should give him a row on the bayou in a skiff. To this proposition he gladly assented, and Asa Scott got the cold shoulder when he offered to accompany them and do the rowing, Flora declaring that she did not need a bit of help to manage a skiff.

The excursion must have been a pleasant and invigorating one, as Sproule brought back bright eyes and a heightened color. The young lady then walked him over the grounds until Laura Thomassieu was compelled to enter a protest against the proceedings, fearing that her convalescent would be wearied and worn out.

"That's always the way with you, Flora," said Judge Dalby. "There is no such thing as breaking you in to the manners of quiet people. You seem to have taken possession of this young gentleman; but you mustn't be too fresh on short acquaintance. Just put that away in your memory-box."

Flora pouted, and said that she couldn't see the use of being cooped up in the house when it was so pleasant out of doors.

The visit of Judge Dalby afforded little or no consolation to Laura Thomassieu. With the aid of a bottle of wine, and fortified by the opinion of Arthur Westleigh, that gentleman oracularly delivered himself thus:

"If that mortgage is such as it has been described to me, and I presume that it is, I don't see how it can be defeated. It seems to be all correct and legal. Both of you ladies recognized your father's signature. It could not have been acknowledged unless it had been properly signed, and it could not have been recorded unless it had been properly acknowledged. It is incredible that any one could have forged the signature, the acknowledgment, and the official authentications. I am sorry to say, Miss Laura, that such a performance was just what might have been expected of the colonel. He was a good-hearted man, but flighty, and always regarded him as not very strong in the upper story. A little liquor would upset him, and he usually played to lose, fond as he was of cards. He was not a bit of a business-man, and had scarcely any idea of the value of money. If he could get money by merely signing his name to a bit of paper, he would never refuse to do it. I have no doubt that when he came down the river he was priding himself upon having done a brilliant stroke of business by putting a ruinous mortgage on his home, and was promising to give you girls a good time and supply you with plenty of pocket money. Now the last of the money has perished with him, and the mortgage remains. To contest that mortgage, it seems to me, would only be to throw good money after bad. If your young friend, Sproule, is willing to pay the amount, or to bid in the property, I am sure that his money will come back to him when times get better."

"Were you acquainted with that Major Brackett?" asked Asa Sproule.

"Never saw the man," replied the Judge. "Never heard of him before this. I suppose he is one of the friends the colonel picked up in New Orleans, where he spent much of his time."

"In my opinion he is a professional gambler, and that is also the opinion of my friend Asa Scott."

"He might be that, and still have plenty of money to lend."

"Is it not singular, Judge Dalby, that Col. Thomassieu should have had such large transactions with that man, without ever mentioning the matter to his family or friends?"

"Rather singular, but the colonel was a singular man. He never allowed his business to bother him, and I suppose he did not want it to bother his family."

Judge Dalby consented, at Sproule's request, to lay the matter before a lawyer at Bucksport, and employ him to examine the record of the mortgage and inquire into the character and antecedents of Major Brackett.

As soon as the conference was ended, Sproule slipped out for a stroll with Flora Dalby, and they did not return until the Judge was ready to go home, a performance which procured for both of them reproaches which they did not seem to mind.

"Tell you what it is," said Sproule to Asa Scott when the two boys had retired to their room at night, "we will have to make a change in our plans. These ladies have been very kind to us, especially to me, and we mustn't leave them in the lurch, now that they are in trouble. We will have to put off our trip to New Orleans."

"All right, Ace, if you say so," replied Snake-root. "You are young yet, and have plenty of time before you to visit New Orleans. That was a pretty girl who was here to-day."

"Pretty is no name for her, my boy. She is as bright as a dollar and as sweet as honey."

"And you are fond of honey, I reckon. Well, I don't blame you."

"I hope you don't suppose, Asa Scott, that I have fallen in love with such a little thing as that."

"Little? She is as much of a woman as you are of a man, if not more so. No, I don't suppose you have fallen in love with her yet, but there is time enough for that."

"When I do fall in love, I will let you know."

"Perhaps you will, Ace, and perhaps you won't. That is a game in which a fellow don't care for a partner. Go it while you're young, old chap, but be sure that you don't bet on two aces again."

There was one matter that bothered Snakeroot's sharp wits. He spoke to Sproule about it that night, and to Laura Thomassieu the next day. He wanted to know how it was that Major Brackett had become aware of the presence of Asa Sproule and Tommy Brackett at the Thomassieu mansion, and of the illness of the former, and he sought the suggestion that the knowledge was derived from mere rumor or hearsay. That unwelcome visitor, he said, seemed to be as well informed of what was going on at the house as any of the inmates, and he asked Miss Thomassieu if she could be sure that none of the servants or laborers on the plantation were in collusion with him. She said that she believed she could trust implicitly every person on the plantation, with the exception of a mulatto named Jim Veazil, who had lately been employed, mainly for the purpose of taking care of the horses and the stable.

Snakeroot said that in his opinion Jim Veazil had better be watched, and it was soon proved that his judgment was not at fault.

There was a supernumerary servant on the place who took an unaccountable interest in Tommy Brackett. This was a negress known as Aunt Hannah, who was believed to be over eighty years old, who frequently followed the boy about, always spoke to him lovingly, and appeared to be anxious to win his confidence and affection.

Jim Veazil also endeavored to ingratiate himself into Tommy's favor, and, as the boy was very fond of horses, the suspected mulatto had a fair chance to work into his good graces.

But Snakeroot kept his eyes open for the benefit both of Jim Veazil and Aunt Hannah, as his suspicious nature feared a plot that might cause the disappearance of Tommy Brackett.

One day Jim Veazil mounted Tommy on a pony, as he was in the habit of doing, and set out with him, walking by the side of the pony. On this occasion they went out of sight of the house for the first time, leaving the lane beyond the cotton fields, and taking a bridle-path that led into the woods. They had gone about half a mile into the woods, when Tommy declared that he would go no further. The mulatto endeavored to persuade him to keep on, but the boy was obstinate, and was about to turn the pony's head in the direction of home, when Veazil seized the bridle and swore that he must go on, whether he wanted to or not. Tommy slipped out of the saddle, and the mulatto caught him by the collar, vowing that he would kill him unless he mounted the horse and submitted to his will.

At this juncture Aunt Hannah came running out of the bushes, panting and trembling.

"Quit dat," she exclaimed. "You jess luff dat boy go, Jim Veazil, you mean, thievin' yaller nigger!"

Veazil tightened his hold on the boy's collar, and the old negress sprang at him like a fury.

He dropped the bridle, and raised his hand to strike her, when Asa Scott suddenly appeared upon the scene, with his cocked revolver pointed at the head of the mulatto, who at once let the boy loose, and took to his heels.

Tommy was remounted on his pony, and was escorted to the house by Aunt Hannah and Snakeroot, the latter congratulating himself upon having discovered which one of the two he had been watching was faithful, and which was false.

The attempted abduction of Tommy Brackett caused much excitement on the plantation. Arthur Westleigh took occasion to say that his friends were not yet free from the influence of that rascally steamboat. Aunt Hannah developed a deeper interest in the young refugee, and insisted that he should be guarded by day and by night. He had been sleeping alone, as the two Asas preferred to room together, and now Aunt Hannah placed a cot in his room, and called up one of her grandsons, a tall and strapping young fellow.

"You, Jefferson Davis," said she, "do you see dat cot? Jess you dror dat cot up ag'in dat door every night, and lay down on dat cot, and stay dar till de mawnin' breaks. You heah me?"

Thus Tommy Brackett was duly guarded. As for Jim Veazil, he disappeared from the neighborhood.

CHAPTER XIV.

MATRIMONIAL ADVANCES.

Tommy's adventure with Jim Veazil naturally called attention to Major Brackett, who was charged with having instigated the mulatto's attempt, and that gentlemanly person was discussed with renewed interest in the family circle at the Thomassieu mansion.

"Talk of the devil, and you are sure to see him," said Asa Scott, one morning, as he stood looking out at one of the windows of the parlor, in which Laura and Emma Thomassieu were seated.

When he was asked the pertinence of that remark, he explained that Major Brackett was driving to the house in a buggy, as he had done on the occasion of his previous visit.

Soon the buggy was driven around to the front door, and a servant announced Major Brackett, who particularly desired an interview with the ladies.

"I suppose he wants to see us alone," said Laura, "and he shall have a fair chance. Asa, you may re-

tire, and see that Tommy is kept out of his sight. Show the gentleman in, Sarah."

When Major Brackett entered the parlor it was apparent that he was "got up" for an extraordinary occasion. Not a gray hair was visible in his black hair and mustache; he was finely dressed, but without the least vulgar display; a rosebud adorned the lapel of his black coat; his hands were incased in kid gloves, and he carried a light cane. Evidently he desired that his fascinations should not be unregarded, and that he should be considered a gentleman of the period.

He seated himself, smiling blandly, and spoke with a pleasant air of assurance, notwithstanding the fact that he was coldly received by both the ladies.

"I hope," he said, "that the unpleasant intelligence which I was lately obliged to bring you has not made me an absolutely unwelcome visitor at this house. I have also hoped that the business difficulty of which I informed you may be, I will not say compromised, but arranged in such a manner that the result will inconvenience no one, but will be mutually agreeable."

As there was no reply to this speech, he smiled again, and continued his *ex parte* remarks.

"If you have taken advice, or have applied to any person capable of examining the matter, you have doubtless discovered that the mortgage which I recently exhibited to you is genuine and valid, and that it can be enforced against this property."

"I am not prepared to dispute your claim," replied Laura, "or to question its legality, or even its justice."

"That being the case, Miss Thomassieu, the explanation of my errand to-day becomes easy. As you profess your inability even to pay the interest as it accrues, and say that you will not endeavor to make the payments, it will naturally become my duty before long, as an act of justice to myself, to enforce by legal measures payment of both principal and interest. In that event the property would have to be sold at auction, and, as you are well aware, in the present condition of the country, it would not bring the amount of the mortgage, and I would be obliged to buy it in. You will perceive that I make no account of the declaration made by a young friend of yours when I was here before, to the effect that he stood ready to buy in the property for you. Supposing him to be able to do so, you know that you would be unable to repay him either principal or interest, and I cannot suppose that you would be willing to accept a gift of such an amount from such a source."

"I had never seriously considered the proposition to which you refer," coldly replied Laura.

"Supposing this property," he said at auction," continued Major Brackett, "you and your sister would be left without any resources, and I would be left with a piece of property on my hands for which I would have no use whatever. I desire to propose an arrangement by which these serious difficulties may be entirely obviated. It is what I may call a family arrangement."

He smiled as he glanced at both the ladies; but Laura merely raised her eyebrows, while a red spot appeared in each of her sister's cheeks.

"I must go further," he continued, "and speak of it as a matrimonial arrangement. To be brief, Miss Thomassieu, I greatly admire your sister, and am anxious that she should become my wife. In the event of her consent to the alliance, I would buy in the property, and would settle half of it upon you, and the other half upon my wife. As a business proposition, nothing could be more liberal than this. As a social proposition, you will permit me to remark that I come of a good family; that I am moderately wealthy; that I have a reputation of which I am not ashamed, and that my disposition is such that I believe I would be a good husband to a good wife. I do not ask an immediate decision upon this offer, but would prefer that you consider it in all its bearings, and if Miss Emma Thomassieu will accept me as a suitor for her hand, I trust that in time she may be willing to accept me as her husband."

The red spots deepened on Emma's cheeks, but her sister was pale and cool.

"This is my sister's affair," said Laura. "I would not presume to dictate to her; but, if she should ask advice from me as the present head of the family, I would say to her that she ought not to consider this offer from a business point of view, but solely with regard to her own feelings, and that she should not allow her decision to be affected in the slightest degree by any thought of her circumstances or mine."

"I do not need a moment's time for consideration," said Emma. "You shall have my answer at once, Mr. Brackett. I regard your offer as disgusting, if not actually disgraceful. If my sister and I were homeless and starving, and you were a millionaire, I would not marry you. If you should repeat your offer a hundred times, my answer would still be no, no, no!"

"I have tried to treat both of you fairly, and liberally," said Major Brackett, rising with his hat in his hand, "but you have not responded in the same spirit. As Miss Emma is so very positive in her reply, I am compelled to presume that her affections are already engaged. If she has fixed them upon that young Bohemian whom I met here the other day, I would respectfully advise her to look before she leaps."

With this parting shot he bowed politely, left the house, and drove away.

Major Brackett's evident allusion to Arthur Westleigh as a "young Bohemian" caused Laura Thomassieu to seriously consider her sister's relations to that gentleman. As Emma's refusal had been given with unnecessary warmth and vehemence, there was force in the remark that her affections might be already engaged, and Laura easily called to mind

many circumstances which indicated that she had fixed them on Westleigh. His preference had been manifest when his visits were discouraged by Col. Thomassieu, and since he had become an inmate of the house the two had been much together, manifesting a decided inclination for each other's society.

Laura determined that before speaking to her sister concerning this important matter she would first interrogate Arthur Westleigh, and she did so at the first opportunity.

He was entirely frank and open in his replies, and was both willing and anxious to give her all possible satisfaction with regard to his position in life and his relations to Emma.

He was a naturalist by profession, he said, but from choice, rather than from necessity. He had not adopted the pursuit as a money-making business, although he believed that there were rewards for naturalists, as well as for others. His father was a physician in large practice, residing in Ohio, where he owned some valuable property, and Arthur and his sister were the only children. Dr. Westleigh sympathized with his son's desire to become a naturalist, and had assured him that money should not be lacking to enable him to prosecute his studies. For nearly a year Arthur had been engaged in collecting specimens of the fauna and flora of the country for himself and for the Smithsonian Institute at Washington. He did not claim that this was a lucrative business, but it pleased him, and was a part of his education, and he did not require a lucrative business.

This occupation, Westleigh said, had brought him to the neighborhood of the Thomassieu place, and he had made his abode in a cabin in the woods, because he desired to be surrounded by the objects to which his attention was devoted, and because he wished to accustom himself to that manner of life. He was free to confess that Emma Thomassieu was the attraction which had kept him in that locality longer than he had intended to remain, and declared that he loved her with a devoted and unswerving affection. He could easily satisfy Miss Thomassieu of the truth of the statements he had made concerning his position in life, and she had known him long enough to be able to form an opinion of his personal character and disposition.

"What you have told me is fair and proper and quite satisfactory," said Laura; "but what does my sister say about it? Does she love you?"

"I have reason to believe that she is not indifferent to me," replied Westleigh, "but have never asked her the question. If I should ask it, I flatter myself that the answer would be favorable to me. My position here has been a delicate one. Col. Thomassieu objected to me, probably because he could not connect my pursuits with a stable income. Since his death, and while I have been an inmate of this house, it has seemed to me that it would be hardly proper to make haste to press my suit. But I would be glad to have your permission to do so."

"Such being your sentiments, it is nothing but right that the affair should be brought to a crisis, and we ought to know what Emma's feelings are. I will ascertain, if you wish; but perhaps you would prefer to make the discovery yourself."

"By all means," eagerly replied Westleigh. "I am not afraid to put my fortune to the test."

He went to look for Emma, and soon brought her in to her sister, blushing and smiling.

"It is all right," he said. "We two are agreed upon this matter, and only need your consent to make us happy."

"It is true, Laura," added Emma. "I love Arthur truly and with my whole heart, and if I cannot become his wife I shall never be a wife. For some time I have believed that he loved me, and have waited patiently until he should see fit to tell me so."

"You seem to be well suited to each other," said Laura, "and I can see no objection to a conditional engagement. But if you will take my advice—and you should remember that I am now the head of the family—it will be only a conditional engagement for the present, until I make such inquiries of Mr. Westleigh as will allow me to make, if the result of those inquiries is satisfactory, and I have not the least doubt that it will be, your engagement will have my entire approbation. As the head of the family, I deem it my duty to make those inquiries."

Laura's position and authority as the head of the family being fully conceded by Westleigh and her sister, it was unanimously agreed that the affair should stand upon the basis which she had proposed.

CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING MOVE.

WHEN Major Brackett was making his matrimonial proposition to Emma Thomassieu, Asa Sproule was not on the plantation, having mounted a horse and gone to Judge Dalby's place. He made these excursions quite frequently, claiming that during his convalescence he required plenty of air and exercise. They were, however, not regarded with favor by Asa Scott, who was of the opinion that the requirements of air and exercise did not compel the lad to always shape his course in the direction of Judge Dalby's place. He also observed that his friend had recently assumed a more manly style of manner and conversation, and had become more particular about his dress, circumstances which clearly indicated the presence of a young lady in the case.

Snakeroot took his friend to task concerning these points, and charged him with the serious offense of "throwing off on his partner."

"Not a bit of it, old boy," replied Sproule. "You and I were partners in the water, and we are partners on land, and so we always shall be, as long as I

have my will. If it had not been for you, I would not be here now, and I don't forget that."

"There are some things, Ace, in which neither men nor boys can be partners," suggested Snakeroot, "and one of those things is girls."

"Girls!" responded Sproule. "What has either of us to do with girls? Time enough to worry about them in a few years from now."

"It seems to me, Ace, that you are beginning the worry too early in life, to judge by the way you go over to Judge Dalby's to see that pretty daughter of his."

"Don't go and be a goose now, Snakeroot. You know that I am not fond of rowing, as you are, and so I have to take to riding. I must go somewhere when I ride, and Judge Dalby's is the only house at which I am acquainted. As for Flora, there is no harm in it if a fellow chooses to pass the time with a pretty girl, and she has no objection. She is real jolly, and I like her."

"She wouldn't be likely to make any objection, Ace, nor would any other sensible girl. There are plenty of them who would be glad enough of your company, because you have the looks and the ways and the money. You belong to the upper crust, you see, and I to the under crust."

"For my part," replied Sproule, "I don't feel a bit upper crusty, and I don't know why you should speak of yourself as under crust. But you may if you choose to, and what's the odds, as long as there is plenty of pie between us? Now, Snakeroot, please don't be jealous of that jolly, nice girl. I can like her without falling in love with her, and I promise you that I don't mean to go back on my partner. Whenever you want me to do anything or go anywhere, all you have to do is to say the word."

Snakeroot was convinced that there must be at least a flirtation on hand, especially as he saw his friend ride off shortly after this conversation, taking the road that led to Judge Dalby's.

The morning was about half-spent when he rode away, and the developments that followed his departure were as sudden as they were unexpected.

Early in the afternoon who should come galloping down to the Thomassieu place but Flora Dalby? She was mounted on her gray mare, which had evidently been pushed to the top of her speed, and the young lady herself was nearly exhausted, but more by excitement than by her exertions.

Asa Scott, who was moping about the place in that state of restlessness which arises from having nothing to do and not caring to do it, was the first to perceive her approach, and he helped her to dismount.

With trembling lips and in agitated tones she told her story, the gist of which was that Asa Sproule had been arrested, charged with horse-stealing, and taken to the jail at Bucksport.

After sitting awhile on the veranda at Judge Dalby's, he had gone to take a stroll with Flora, and they had not got out of sight of the house when half a dozen men rode up, one of whom dismounted and approached Sproule.

"You are my prisoner," said this man, as he laid his hand on the lad's shoulder.

Flora's scream brought to the spot her father, who recognized one of the men as a constable and deputy sheriff, but the others were strangers to him. He asked what was the matter, and was told that Asa Sproule had been arrested on a charge of horse-stealing.

"Horse-stealing!" exclaimed Judge Dalby. "That is absurd. I am well acquainted with him, and he would no more steal a horse than would I or my daughter."

"That may be true," replied the deputy; "but the charge has been made and sworn to, and I have the warrant, and can do nothing but arrest him."

"Why did you bring such a crowd? You could easily take him alone, if he is to be taken at all."

"I was told that he was a desperate character, and you know what horse-thieves are."

"I would like to know who made the charge," said the judge.

"Major Lewis Brackett."

"A stranger, a man nobody knows anything about, except that he is a professional gambler. This is too bad."

"That is none of my business," replied the deputy.

"I have the warrant, and must execute it."

"There is nothing to do but to submit," said the judge to Sproule. "I will go with you to Bucksport, and we will soon get you clear of this difficulty."

Judge Dalby ordered a servant to saddle two horses and bring them out, and he and Asa Sproule mounted and rode away with the sheriff and his posse, leaving Flora bathed in tears.

But the plucky little hoyden was good for something besides crying, and they were hardly out of sight when she was on the back of her gray mare, riding at full speed to the Thomassieu place.

She told this story in the presence of all "the family," except Asa Sproule himself, and her auditors were simply astounded.

"What does it mean?" asked Arthur Westleigh.

"Of course the boy has been guilty of no crime. Nothing can be proved against him, and we can positively disprove any such charge as this. But what is the meaning of his arrest?"

"What was the meaning of my arrest in St. Louis?" replied Snakeroot. "I was falsely accused of stealing a pocket-book, and was locked up over night. I don't know what that was for, unless it was meant to hold me back until those scamps could get a chance to shoot me down. Perhaps that man Brackett wants to get Ace out of the way, because he said that he would buy in this place if it was sold under his mortgage."

"Since his last visit here," said Laura Thomassieu,

"I believe that he can hardly have thought it worth while to take such a step for that purpose."

"As I have had occasion to remark," said Arthur Westleigh, "the ties that bind us to that rascally flatboat are being drawn closer. We know that Major Brackett, as he calls himself, is connected with the Bumsteads, and we know what means they employed to get possession of Asa Sproule's draft on St. Louis. As they believe that he can control a large amount of property, I am strongly inclined to suspect them of making another attempt, with the aid of Brackett, to extort money from him."

"That is likely enough," replied Snakeroot, "though I don't know how they would manage to get it out of Mr. Brashear. Anyhow, we must follow the thing up at once, and help Judge Dalby to get Ace out of their hands."

Horses were ordered to be saddled immediately. It was arranged that Flora Dalby should remain with the Thomassieu sisters for the present, and that Tommy Brackett should be carefully watched and guarded, as it was possible that the development of Major Brackett's plot might include his capture.

Arthur Westleigh and Asa Scott then mounted and rode to Bucksport, reaching that place about dusk.

Bucksport, although the county seat, was a hamlet which could not even aspire to the dignity of a village. It was composed of a few houses that sorely needed painting, two general stores, a tavern, which was mainly supported by its bar, a blacksmith shop and some other little shops, a rickety courthouse, and a log jail. Bucksport had probably seen better days; certainly it could not have seen any worse.

Judge Dalby was found in the bar-room of the tavern, where he had just been refreshing himself with some of the home-made whisky of the country.

He said that he had been to see the lawyer with whom he had consulted concerning Major Brackett and his mortgage. The result of his inquiries was that nothing could be done in Asa Sproule's case until the next day. The magistrate, who had issued the warrant for his arrest, was not authorized to accept bail, and it would be necessary to apply to the circuit judge, who lived thirty miles from Bucksport. An application for a writ of *habeas corpus* would be made the next day, with the view of procuring the release of the prisoner on bail. This proceeding would require time, and in the meanwhile Asa Sproule would be compelled to remain in the Bucksport jail. Unpleasant as this condition of affairs was, there was no help for it.

The magistrate was seen, but no consolation could be drawn from the interview. It might be true, he said, that Asa Sproule was a young person of property, who could not be guilty of the crime of horse-stealing, and that his time and place had been in that vicinity could be fully accounted for. In that case it would be easy to show his innocence. The magistrate could only say for himself that he was obliged to issue the warrant, as the charge was sworn to by a gentleman of highly respectable appearance, although a stranger.

"There is nothing more to be done here at present," said Judge Dalby, after he had again refreshed himself. "Mr. Westleigh will be needed at Miss Thomassieu's place to-night, and I will be needed at my house. As we can be of no use here, we had better go home, and return early in the morning."

Snakeroot assented to this proposition, but announced his intention of remaining in Bucksport and staying with his friend until the trouble was over. When he was told that he could be of no use to him, he said that he could at least be near him, and adhered to his determination.

When Judge Dalby and Westleigh had left Bucksport, he went to the jail, and asked permission to see Asa Sproule. The jailer, who was no other than the deputy-sheriff who had made the arrest, demurred to this request, but finally permitted him to interview the prisoner in his presence and through the opening in his cell door.

This interview was quite unsatisfactory to both the lads, and Snakeroot could only assure Sproule that his friends meant to secure his release as soon as possible, and that he meant to stay right there, so that he might be near him.

"Don't worry about me too much, old boy," replied Sproule. "It doesn't fret me to be shut up here for awhile, and I shall make the best of it. It is a new experience in life—that's all."

"But it's a confounded shame," said Snakeroot, "that such a fellow as you, who never in his life thought of committing a crime, and who is able to buy up all the horses in this wretched county, should be imprisoned here under a false charge."

"Yes, it is a shame, and it is a disgrace to the laws we live under, and when I get out of here I have a strong notion that I will try hard to make somebody smart for this. I only hope that there may not be something behind my arrest—some sort of a blow that none of us may be able to ward off."

As this remark expressed the fear that had taken possession of his own mind, Snakeroot made no reply in the presence of the jailer, but appealed to that official for permission to occupy the cell with his friend during the night.

This request was resolutely refused by the jailer, upon whom the arguments and entreaties of the two friends had not the least effect, and Asa Scott was finally obliged to say good-night and leave the jail.

He returned to the tavern, where he ate his supper, secured a room, and went to bed, filled with sad forebodings for which there was no visible cause.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SEQUEL TO THE ARREST.

A boy's sleep is usually sweet and deep, but Asa Scott was troubled and restless after he went to bed in the Bucksport tavern. His slumber was nothing

but a series of unpleasant dreams, in which he and Asa Sproule were continually passing through perilous scenes, wherever the faces of Major Brackett and the Bumsteads were strangely mingled, and every now and then he awoke with a start from a vivid and painful sense of danger.

At last he was fairly aroused by hurried steps on the stairway and in the narrow hall, followed by a loud knocking at the door of his room.

"Who's there?" he asked, starting up in bed.

"It's me," was the answer.

"Who is me?"

"Jim Biggs, the boss of this here hotel. Open the door quick! I've got news fur you."

Snakeroot jumped out of bed, hastily lighted his candle, and opened the door, admitting the landlord, who was a large man, hatless and coatless, his face beaming with excitement and whisky.

"That friend of yours is gone," was Biggs's terse and blunt explanation of the alarm.

"Friend of mine—gone—what do you mean?" asked Snakeroot, who was dazed by his surroundings and by the landlord's abrupt manner.

"That friend of yours who was put in jail—the horse-thief who was fetched in yesterday. He's gone."

"What do you mean by gone?" asked the still bewildered Snakeroot.

"Toted off—carried away by lynchers. 'Spect he is strung up to a tree somewhere afore now."

At first Snakeroot had but a vague idea of the meaning of this terrible intelligence, and further explanations were required before he could comprehend it.

According to the landlord's account some twelve or fifteen men had ridden into Bucksport after midnight, when the inhabitants were wrapped in their soundest slumbers. All were masked, and all were heavily armed. They went direct to the jail, woke up the jailer, and compelled him, under threat of instant death, to give up the keys of the jail. Then they opened the cell in which Asa Sproule was confined, bound and gagged him, placed him on a horse, and rode away rapidly. All their movements were characterized by silence and secrecy, and the jailer, who was the only person who saw or heard them, had not the slightest clew to their identity.

"As soon as they had left the jail," continued the landlord, completing his story of the affair, "Bill Trainor, the jailer, came over here and roused me up, and he is down in the bar-room now, drinkin' with some men."

"Has no alarm been given?" asked the boy.

"Has no one thought of following them and trying to save the poor fellow?"

"What's the use?" replied Biggs. "The lynchers were out of sight of town by the time Bill Trainor got me roused up. Even if we could have got together men enough to whip them, they would be far out of the way before we could begin to move."

"Do you think they meant to hang him?" asked Snakeroot, as the question sent a deadly chill to his heart.

"Of course they did. That's what they allers do."

"But he was innocent of any crime."

"Mebbe he was, and mebbe he wasn't. They must ha' been sure that he was the right chap, or they wouldn't ha' gone fur him. I never knowed a crowd of that kind to make a mistake yet. Leastways, they never owned to it."

Asa Scott, who had dressed himself by this time, followed the landlord down to the bar-room, where he found half a dozen men, one of whom was the jailer, discussing the occurrence, and enlivening the discussion with frequent drinks of whisky. He could easily perceive that they were decidedly of the landlord's opinion, that the prisoner must have been a known horse-thief, or he would not have been made the subject of that nocturnal visitation.

Could it be that they were right in that opinion? was the thought that forced itself upon him against his will. Was it possible that Asa Sproule, his fresh and free-hearted friend, was really a scoundrel and a criminal; that the romantic story he had told concerning himself was utterly false; that the kind and apparently honest old gentleman, Richard Brashear, was in collusion with him? Snakeroot hated himself for entertaining, even momentarily, so infamous but almost reasonable a suggestion.

"You had better let me give you a good drink of whisky, young chap," said the landlord. "Seems like you are all shook to pieces."

As Snakeroot was still half stunned, and his nerves were all in a flutter, he felt as if he needed something to "pull him together." So he accepted the whisky that was poured out for him, and drank it down at once. The fiery liquor seemed to wake him up immediately, putting new life in his veins and fresh purpose in his heart. He turned and accosted the jailer.

"Could you do nothing to save him?" he asked.

"What could I or any other man do ag'inst such a crowd as that?" contemptuously replied Trainor.

"Did they say that they meant to hang him?"

"They didn't say so, but anybody with a bit of sense knows what they meant to do, and what they've done afore this. A stout rope and a handy tree is what a horse-thief is bound to get when he is caught in this part of the country."

"But he is no horse-thief. He is a young gentleman from St. Louis, where he has a large property, and he could buy all the horses in this county. Since he came to this neighborhood he has not been away from Col. Thomassieu's place, except to visit at Judge Dalby's."

"I don't care where he came from," sneeringly replied Trainor, "and I don't care nothin' about his property. Don't believe nothin' about it, neither. I do know that the gentleman who swore to the charge was as nice a gentleman as ever trod in shoe-

leather, and you may bet your head ag'inst a green gourd that the men who took that chap out of the jail knew just what they were after, and made no mistake in the matter. Ain't that so, gentlemen?"

A murmur of assent answered this interrogatory. "I would advise you, young feller," continued Trainor, "to keep a still tongue in your head, because it is already suspected that you were that chap's pardner in the boss-thievin' business, and I half believe it myself."

"You half believe that, do you?" exclaimed Snakeroot, as he stepped toward the jailer, his eyes blazing with excitement and indignation. "Now I will tell you what I wholly believe. I believe that my friend—and I am proud to call him so—has not been lynched. I believe that the men who took him out of the jail had no idea of lynching him. I believe that this whole business is some cursed plot to get money from him, and I believe that you have been hired to take part in that plot."

It was a sudden inspiration that forced this accusation from Snakeroot, and the change in Trainor's demeanor told him that the shot had counted. The jailer turned pale and dropped his eyes. When he flamed up, his indignation seemed to require an effort.

"What do you mean by that, you young scoundrel?" he asked.

"I am no scoundrel," replied the boy. "I mean exactly what I said, and I will prove my words true before I am done with you."

"Take it back this minute, or I will cut your ears off!"

"I take nothing back, and I am not afraid of your cutting."

Trainor drew a knife, but Snakeroot already had his revolver cocked in his hand. The landlord stepped between the belligerents, and his example was followed by others. The jailer was easily pacified, and the boy was not at all anxious to continue the quarrel.

"Let the young fool go," said Trainor, as he put up his knife. "I won't hurt him. The whisky has got into his head, Treckon."

"I wish that you would have my horse saddled and brought around, Mr. Biggs," said Asa Scott.

"What for? What do you want o' your horse, now?"

"I want to follow those men, and find out what has become of my friend."

The landlord led the boy to the door, and pointed out at the night.

"Jest look thar," said he, "It's as dark as a black cat. You can't sc'ize see your hand afore your face. You could never find that trail, nor foller it if you found it. I like you grit, young feller. I am proud to see you stick up for your friend, right or wrong, and I mean that you shall have a fair show. Jest you keep quiet till daylight, and as soon as it is light enough to see, you shall have your horse, and I will go with you. Thar'll be plenty more on the trail, when they know it ain't dangerous."

Snakeroot followed this advice, as he was unable to do otherwise, and waited restlessly until streaks of dawn appeared in the eastern sky, and the gray morning twilight proclaimed the approach of sunrise. Then Jim Biggs kept his promise, promptly. Asa Scott's horse and another were saddled, and he and the landlord rode away, followed by four of the men in the bar-room, among whom was the jailer, Bill Trainor.

The road by which the masked men had entered and left Bucksport was soon found, and then it was easy to follow their trail. Asa Scott closely scrutinized, as did the rest of the party, the trees that grew near the road, fearing to find, what he hoped and believed he would not find, the dead body of his friend dangling by a rope from some stout limb. But they traveled the distance of fully a mile from the village, passing many trees that were eminently available for lynching purposes, but seeing no subject upon whom lynchers had operated, and perceiving that the horses, whose tracks they were following, had still been kept going at a rapid gait.

"This is a queer piece of business," said the landlord of the Bucksport hotel. "I've knowed men to be taken out and hung, time and again, from one place and another, but never knowed the lynchers to go more'n half a mile without finishing their work."

The others agreed that it was a queer piece of business, with the exception of Bill Trainor, who had nothing to say, and Asa Scott's spirits rose as they rode along and saw nothing to induce the belief that his friend had been foully dealt with. When they had reached a point about two miles from the village, the party came to a halt, as if by common consent.

"We needn't foller the trail any farder," said the landlord. "There ain't no subject for a coroner in this business. Those men are far away from here by this time, and we couldn't begin to overhaul 'em, whatever it is that they mean to do. We must turn about and go back to Bucksport."

Asa Scott was anxious to keep on, but Jim Biggs persuaded him to return with the party, assuring him that he could do nothing by himself, and that his only chance to find his friend would be to await the arrival of Judge Dalby and Arthur Westleigh, who had promised to be in Bucksport early that morning.

"Tell you what it is, young feller," said the landlord, taking Snakeroot aside when they had reached the tavern, "I believe you were right about this piece of business, that those men didn't take your friend out to hang him, and that there's some cursed mischief a-go'in'. You may count Jim Biggs on your side now, and if Bill Trainor tries to interfere with you he will get me a brand of skin."

CHAPTER XVII.

JASON'S ISLAND.

JUDGE DALBY and Arthur Westleigh came riding into Bucksport early in the morning, as they had promised to do, and were greatly astonished and alarmed by the story that was told them of the abduction of Asa Sproule. They agreed with Asa Scott that he had not been carried away to be lynched, but for the purpose of extorting money.

"As I have said before," remarked Westleigh, "the ties that bind us to those rascally flatboat people are being drawn closer, and I believe that Major Brackett is connected with them in this game. But it is my opinion, Asa, that you ought not to have quarreled with anybody, as we will need the good will, if not the assistance, of the people of these parts."

"I haven't quarreled with anybody but that jailer," said Snakeroot, "and I feel sure that he has been hired to play a part in the game. Mr. Biggs, the landlord here, is on our side, and I believe that none of the honest people will be against us."

In fact, when the landlord learned that Asa Scott and his friends were going to follow the trail of the masked men, he offered to accompany them as a guide; but his services were respectfully declined by Arthur Westleigh, who said that they were merely going out to take observations, and would not require any assistance at that time, as he was well acquainted with the country.

"The fact is," said Westleigh to his companions as they were riding out of Bucksport, "I believe that I can take you direct to the place where those men have concealed Sproule; but I am afraid that we will then be in the fix of the farmer who found his kettle. He knew that it was at the bottom of the well, but he also knew that he could not get it."

Judge Dalby was anxious to know Westleigh's reasons for his belief that he could so easily find the retreat of the abductors; but the young gentleman preferred to be silent on that subject.

"Wait till we reach the point at which I am aiming," he said. "If I am mistaken in my belief, it will not be necessary to say anything more about it. If I am not mistaken, I will tell you all I know about the matter."

Although there was apparently some mystery connected with Westleigh's expressions, his companions forbore to press him further, and contented themselves with pushing their horses. They found it easy enough to follow the trail in the main road, as it was made by a number of horses going at a good rate of speed. About five miles from Bucksport the trail diverged from the main road, and entered a bridge-path that led into the woods. Here the investigators halted for the purpose of ascertaining whether the party they were following had divided at that point; but it was soon made evident that they had all taken the bridge-path.

"Just as I supposed," said Arthur Westleigh, as he led the way into the woods.

The party followed the bridge-path without halting, and without perceiving any indications of a halt on the part of those who had preceded them, until they were, as Westleigh said, some ten miles from Bucksport. Then he requested them to dismount and tether their horses, allowing him to go in advance as a scout. As they could see the glimmer of water through the trees, their curiosity and anxiety were painfully excited.

In a few minutes Westleigh beckoned to them, and they crept cautiously, as he had done, to a clump of bushes behind which he was concealed, and found themselves on the border of a large lake. Looking through the bushes, they saw an island, some three or four acres in extent, in the middle of the lake, and about two hundred yards from the shore. No persons were visible on the island, but a sure sign of occupation was seen in a faint column of smoke that rose above the tops of the trees with which the island was covered.

"That is the place," said Westleigh. "They have taken Asa Sproule to that island. Don't show yourself, my boy. This point is settled, and we can do nothing more at present but go back."

"Go back!" exclaimed Snakeroot. "Go back without doing anything to let Ace know that his friends have found him and mean to help him?"

"Yes. It may seem a hard thing to do, but it is the best thing. We would only succeed in letting his enemies know that we are here, and it is important that they should not suspect that we have discovered their hiding-place."

The three searchers crept cautiously back to their horses, mounted, and rode off in the direction from which they had come.

"Now that my suspicions have been proved true," said Westleigh, when they were fairly out of sight of the lake, "I will tell you the reasons upon which I had based them. The island which you have seen, as Judge Dalby knows, is called Jason's Island. The lake in which it stands is not now what it used to be. There was once a cut-off which took from the bayou below here a large portion of its surplus water, and in those days the lake was merely a swamp when the river was low. A corduroy road was built from the mainland to the island by an eccentric old man who had settled there, which was under water only when the Mississippi was at flood height. Since the cut-off has been closed, owing to natural causes, the water in the bayou, having no longer an outlet, has been backed up by the river, and the swamp has become a lake. The old corduroy road makes an easy ford at low water, and when the river is at a medium stage, it is about girth-deep for a horse. When the river is high, the island can only be reached by boats. Am I correct in these particulars, Judge Dalby?"

"Quite so, sir, if you are sure about the condition of the ford."

"I know of the ford from experience," said Westleigh. "And now I must let you into a little secret. With my occupation as a naturalist in this part of the country I have combined some detective work for the United States Government. The deputy collector for this district, Capt. Roberts, who is a particular friend of mine, has special instructions to make a clearance of the moonshine distillers, who are more numerous in these parts than you may suppose. As my pursuits take me into the most remote and unfrequented localities, he has requested me to keep my eyes open for indications of secret stills, and thus I am on his pay-roll in the capacity of a detective—a fact which might render some of the people unfriendly to me if they knew it. I have had good reason to suspect that Jason's Island is the head-quarters, not only of illicit distillers, but of a gang of thieves, and I was inclined to believe that they were in some way connected with Bumstead's flatboat, the Honest Trader. The loss of the War Eagle, and the complications that followed that disaster, checked my investigations, but now I am convinced that my suspicions were well founded."

"That is all very interesting," said Judge Dalby, "but I am anxious to know to what it leads. We still seem to be in the fix of the farmer whose kettle was at the bottom of the well."

"The point I am coming to is this: We can have plenty of help, and help of the best and most reliable kind, to make a raid on Jason's Island, to capture those scoundrels, and to release Asa Sproule. I will send a message to Capt. Roberts at once, telling him to meet me at Judge Dalby's house, and you may rely upon it that the work will be speedily and thoroughly done. But we must keep our purpose and our preparations secret, as I have no doubt that there are men in the neighborhood who would gladly give information to the rascals."

Arthur Westleigh stopped at Bucksport to write a note, and employed a boy to take it to its destination, promising him extra pay for speed. In response to the inquiries of Jim Biggs he said that he believed he was on the track of the men who had abducted Asa Sproule, but preferred to say nothing more about the matter just then. He would soon be able to give definite information, and he and his friends would then be glad of the assistance of Mr. Biggs.

The three searchers returned to Judge Dalby's house, and Arthur Westleigh rode on to the Thomas-sieu place to report progress and attend to the welfare of the ladies, while Asa Scott remained to write a letter to Mr. Brashear at St. Louis, relating the arrest of Asa Sproule and all the subsequent developments.

It was late in the afternoon when Westleigh got back, and shortly after his return Capt. Roberts arrived. He was a man of about thirty-five, as dark as the most pronounced Southerner, alert and decided in his movements, and with an appearance of enterprise and determination that favorably impressed them with whom he was to be associated in a dangerous undertaking.

"I started as soon as I got your note, Westleigh," he said, "and have made good time to this place. Give me all the particulars now, as briefly as you can, so that we may get to work with as little delay as possible."

Arthur Westleigh ran over, concisely and clearly, his knowledge of the flatboat "Honest Trader" and Jason's Island, together with all the points in connection with the arrival of the two Asas and subsequent complications, including the arrest of Asa Sproule, his abduction, and the result of following the trail of the abductors.

"You are right, as I judge," said Capt. Roberts, "in supposing that your friend Sproule is alive and on that island. Whether he is safe there is quite another question. If the object of the rascals is to extort money from him, they will hesitate at nothing to carry their scheme into effect."

"But how are they going to get the money?" asked Asa Scott. "Mr. Brashear would refuse to pay a draft on him, even if Sproule should sign it, unless he knew that there was nothing wrong about it."

"There are more ways than one, young man, to wring money from a person who has it. Perhaps they may try the plan of the Italian brigands, who threaten their captives with death, and treat them barbarously unless the ransom money is paid. Such men as Mr. Westleigh describes those Bumsteads to be are capable of anything. It is clear that we must get your friend out of their clutches if we can, and I assure you, Westleigh, that I will be glad of the chance to raid that island, as I have no doubt that moonshining is carried on there. The capture of Sproule will afford a sufficient excuse for the work, and thus I shall avoid incurring the enmity of the people hereabout, who are not at all averse to that style of evading the tax on whisky."

"That's a fact," said Judge Dalby. "I claim to be a law-abiding man, myself, but am not ashamed to get hold of a pure article of liquor at a low price. I would never stir a foot to help to arrest moonshiners, nor would I wink an eye to give information concerning them. But this is another sort of an affair."

"Of course it is, and the only question is of the best way to go to work. I suppose, Westleigh, that the island is as good as a fortification to the men who hold it?"

"It is, indeed. A few men, well armed, could hold the ford so that it would be impossible to cross on the sunken road."

"Then we must operate on the water. We must make a naval attack."

"How will you do that?"

"You will see before long. I will now go and get my men ready, together with such tools and mate-

rials as we shall need, and will meet you at the island early in the morning. I will have twenty good men, but you may bring a few more, if you know any upon whom you can rely."

Capt. Roberts described the point, on the side of the lake opposite to the ford, at which he would be found in the morning, and rode away rapidly.

Asa Scott was sent to Buckport, to sound Mr. Jim Biggs concerning the enlistment of a few men, being specially instructed to say nothing concerning the suspected moonshining operations, and Arthur Westleigh and Judge Dalby proceeded to put their weapons in order for sharp work.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JERRY'S TWO VISITORS—THE MAJOR'S PRISONER.

MAJOR BRACKETT had partially told the truth when he described to the Thomassieu sisters his last interview with their father on the War Eagle.

When he reached the bow of the boat, he perceived that he had been closely followed by Col. Thomassieu; but that gentleman was scarcely touched by the steam, and Major Brackett did not endeavor to dissuade him from jumping overboard, nor did he seize hold of him, as he represented himself to have done, for the purpose of preventing him from jumping. In fact, he was too much occupied in attending to his own safety to think of any other person.

The dry-goods box of which he spoke to the Thomassieu sisters was a small one, but sufficient to bear his weight in the water, and he was careful when he put it into the river, to drop it out of the way of the people who were struggling and drowning. He was also careful to keep it out of their way when he swam from the boat with it.

Thus it happened that his start was made considerably to the eastward of Asa Sproule and Asa Scott, and that he was carried further down the river than they were, in his effort to strike the western shore of the river. Thus it happened, also, that the point which he finally reached was exactly the place at which he would have desired to make a landing.

This place was about two miles below the point where the "Honest Trader" was moored, and on the bank was a log-cabin, with a log-stable near it. Major Brackett drew himself out of the water when he reached the shore, and clambered up the bank, somewhat impeded by his dripping garments, but glad to find himself on solid ground. He saw the cabin before him, and halted it.

His call being unanswered, he went to the door, knocked loudly, and shouted again.

There was a sound of some one moving within the cabin, followed by a voice asking, "Who's there?"

"It is I, Major Brackett. Let me in, Jerry, and be quick about it."

A key was turned in a lock, a bolt was shot, and the door opened, revealing by the light of a tallow-candle a half-dressed man with tangled hair.

"Is it really you, major?" he asked. "How did you get here at this time of night? Why, you're all dripping with water. Where on earth did you come from?"

"Out of the river, of course. The fact is, Jerry, that I was a passenger on the War Eagle, and she blew up a few miles above here!"

"Thunderation! The War Eagle blew up? And you've swum ashore!"

"Yes, with the help of a dry-goods box."

"What on earth is goin' to happen next?"

"You are going to happen to find some whisky and give me a stiff horn. Then I will happen to dry my clothes and get some rest."

"The real moonshine, Jason's Island brand," said Jerry, as he brought out a bottle of liquor, and Major Brackett refreshed himself vigorously. Then he began to remove his clothes, carefully taking out the contents, and gave them to Jerry to wring out at the door, and while this business was being attended to he told the story of the explosion.

While they were thus employed a cry was heard. "Shouldn't wonder if that's another of them," said Jerry.

"Hardly possible," replied Brackett; "but it may be. Go and see what is the matter."

Jerry went to the river, his movements hastened by another cry, and soon returned with Col. Thomassieu, who was so exhausted that he could hardly stand. The surprise of the two survivors was great. It may be added that Thomassieu expressed pleasure at meeting his acquaintance, but Brackett did not seem to be at all overjoyed.

"I supposed you had gone under," said the latter. "I would not have believed it possible that a man could escape who went overboard as you did."

"I may be old," replied Col. Thomassieu, after he had invigorated himself with a modicum of the Jason's Island moonshine, "but I am tough, and am a better swimmer than many of the young fellows. With the aid of a stick of cordwood I kept afloat very well; but I must confess that I was nearly ready to give up the ship when I saw the light of this house."

"It's consarned queer," remarked Jerry, "that both of you gentlemen should be saved and should bring up at this same place; but, as you are here, the best thing you can do will be to dry your clothes and get some rest."

"Glad enough to get dry," replied the old gentleman, as he began to remove his wet apparel; "but I would rather be moving toward home than resting. My girls will be anxious about me."

"How far from home do you suppose you are?" asked Brackett.

"I couldn't give a guess."

"You seem to know less about your own neighborhood than I do, though I suppose you are pretty badly upset just now. You are only about fifteen miles from your place. Nearer than that if you

could go straight, but you have to take a round-about route. If you are anxious to get home, I will accompany you. Our friend here will furnish us with horses and act as our guide."

"Glad to hear it, major, and will be pleased to have your company. The sooner we start the better it will suit me."

Within half an hour the party was ready to start. There were but two horses, and it was arranged that Col. Thomassieu and Jerry, being the lightest weights, should ride one of them, while Major Brackett mounted the other. The guide said that they ought to be able to reach the Thomassieu place by daylight. Before they set out Major Brackett had a whispered conference with Jerry.

"Why don't you put him out of the way?" said the latter, in answer to a bit of information conveyed to him by the major.

"Because I don't like that sort of work, and because I hope to make a better use of him."

"You ought to know your own business best; but I would drop him, if I had the say."

The night was dark, and the route was quite blind to a person who was inexperienced in night traveling in that region; but Col. Thomassieu, although he confessed to a very slight acquaintance with the region south of the bayou, could not help perceiving that Jerry led the party through byways and bridle-paths, never striking anything that had the appearance of a main road. Yet he trusted to his companions, as he could not well do otherwise, and said nothing about the singularity of the course, until the gray light of dawn began to penetrate the darkness of the forest, and it was reasonable to suppose that he must be approaching his destination.

When he at last spoke he got no more satisfactory answer than that the guide knew what he was doing, that he was choosing the shortest route, and that he would soon bring the party in sight of the Thomassieu place.

What they actually came in sight of, just before sunrise, was a large and sluggish lake, with a flat island of considerable size in the middle of it.

"I know where I am now!" exclaimed Col. Thomassieu, jerking at the bridle which was held by the man who rode before him. "That is Jason's Island, and you have been taking me far away from my home. I want to know what it means."

"It means," replied Brackett, who was a few paces in the rear, "that you are to go just where I wish you to go, and nowhere else."

"Stop the horse! I will not stir another step!"

"Oh, but you will!" and a pistol-barrel contributed its persuasive influence to this confident remark.

"You are going right over to that island," added Major Brackett. "I don't want to kill you, or to hurt you in any way; but if you make any difficulty we will be obliged to tie you on the horse."

"This is a new reading of the parable," said the old gentleman, with a faint sneer. "A certain man went down to Jericho, and fancied that he had fallen into the hands of good Samaritans; but they turned out to be thieves. Drive on, Samaritans! I will promise not to kick against what I can't help."

Jerry blew a whistle with a peculiar tone, which was answered from the island, and pushed his horse across the sunken causeway. Col. Thomassieu riding behind him, and Major Brackett bringing up the rear.

The old gentleman was surprised to discover on Jason's Island what might be called a "settlement." There were three stout log cabins, and a shanty whose appearance and surroundings told him plainly that he was in the presence of an establishment for the manufacture of "moonshine" whisky. He had no objection to the illicit distillation of liquor; in fact, he was fond of the product of the surreptitious still when he could get nothing better; but at that moment his faculties were mainly occupied with reflections upon his possible fate. His position seemed to be precarious in view of the fact that he was in the power of an organized band of law-breakers.

Reflection profited him nothing, and he submissively obeyed a request to dismount and enter one of the cabins. This was a double log building, with a log partition dividing it, and with a low loft over each room. The apartment into which Col. Thomassieu was ushered contained a cot and a few other rude articles of furniture.

"I presume that I may consider myself a prisoner here," he said, turning to Major Brackett, who was standing in the doorway.

"Partly so," was the reply. "You might get out, if you should make the effort; but you would be unable to leave the island, and you had better stay in here and keep clear of trouble. You shall be well treated."

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT WHISKY DID—A ROGUE'S DEVICE.

THE promise made to Col. Thomassieu, that he should be well treated, was doubtless kept as well as the resources of Jason's Island allowed. Food was abundant and of fair quality, although a considerable improvement might have been made in the cuisine. Of this the captive made no complaint, as he was plentifully supplied with another of his necessities of life, liquor which was at least unadulterated, although the fire and freshness of its flavor should have been toned down by age.

Col. Thomassieu was not what may be called a hard drinker, but had been a constant drinker for many years. His experience in the army when its officers were by no means abstemious, had bred a habit in him, which had been strengthened by his recent experience in the so-called Confederate army. He preferred wine and the company of high livers when he could get it; when he could not, he was

content with whisky, and less particular about his company. But he was accustomed to keep his clay moistened, and the use of stimulating fluids had become a part of his nature.

The period of his captivity on Jason's Island was necessarily a non-particular period, so to speak, and his habits were doubtless well known to Major Brackett, if not to others of his custodians. It is certain that they were extremely liberal in supplying him with that product of the still which paid no duty to the United States, and that he drank it as if he liked it. In his enforced seclusion he turned to the whisky jug as if it were the only friend left to him, and communed with it freely.

Apparently Col. Thomassieu was not a man of great strength of mind. Apparently, also, Major Brackett had an object of his own in thus providing his prisoner with that "enemy in the brain."

That object was soon made clear, even to the obtuse intellect of Col. Thomassieu.

Major Brackett entered his apartment one afternoon, bringing two bottles of champagne.

"I want to make you as comfortable as possible while you are here," said the visitor, "and hope that you will give me credit for trying to do so. Our Jason's Island whisky is not the finest beverage in the world, but it is the best we have had until now, when I have fortunately been able to get hold of some champagne. I have brought you a supply for immediate use, and hope you will be pleased with it."

A bottle was opened, and Col. Thomassieu tasted it by pouring out a glassful and emptying it at a draught.

"I would be a churl," he remarked, as he refilled his glass, "if I were not to admit that I am thankful for your endeavors to make my captivity endurable; but the question keeps recurring, why am I a captive? What right have you to shut me up here and keep me from my family, who doubtless believe that I am dead?"

"That is just the point," replied Brackett. "They believe you to be dead, and I have taken pains to confirm them in that belief."

"You? What have you to do with my family?"

"Much, but more with your property. I will tell you freely what I have done and what I propose to do. It will give me pleasure to impart this information to you over your wine, and I want you to know just where you stand. You will remember that you got a loan of four thousand dollars from me in St. Louis, and gave me a mortgage on your plantation to secure it."

"Yes."

"By a little skillful manipulation I raised the amount of that mortgage to \$40,000, and I have placed it on record, my object being, as you will easily perceive, to get possession of the property. I visited your daughters, told them such a story as convinced them of your death—"

"What a good Samaritan you are, to be sure!" sneered Col. Thomassieu.

"Just so. I like to smooth matters over and make as little trouble as possible. I then exhibited my mortgage, and explained it to the ladies. They were considerably astonished, as I expected them to be, and your eldest daughter—a fine, firm and capable lady—assured me that she and her sister would never be able to pay even the interest of the mortgage. I informed them that I would be under the painful necessity of foreclosing, to which they assented, but another person present spoke up pretty sharply. Do you remember a boy—a wealthy young greenhorn, as he appeared to be—who was playing cards with us on the War Eagle just before the explosion?"

"Oh, yes—a fine young fellow, in whom I took a lively interest."

"That was the person who spoke. He had been saved from the explosion, and had brought up at your house. He said that he believed the mortgage to be a fraud, and that he meant to have the matter looked into. He also assured your daughters that if the property should be sold under the mortgage, he would buy it in for the family."

"Good boy!" remarked Col. Thomassieu, as he poured out another glass of wine.

"A young fool is what I consider him. He will not be allowed to interfere with my plans. My next move was to negotiate for an agreeable compromise, by which the property could be kept in the family. Your youngest daughter, colonel, is a remarkably sweet specimen of young womanhood."

"Take care what you say, sir," growled the old gentleman. "My daughter is not to be spoken of lightly."

"I have neither spoken nor thought of her lightly. My intentions in that quarter have been strictly honorable. I visited the ladies again, and made an offer of marriage to Miss Emma Thomassieu in the presence of her sister, promising that if my offer should be accepted I would buy in the property under the foreclosure of the mortgage, and would settle it upon the two sisters. It strikes me, colonel, that that was a very honorable and liberal offer."

"You are a Samaritan, indeed!" replied the old gentleman.

"And yet I grieve to say that my liberal offer was promptly declined by both of those misguided ladies—not only declined, but repudiated."

"Perhaps they were relying upon the offer of assistance made by the young fellow you spoke of," suggested Col. Thomassieu.

"I think not. They gave me to understand that they would not accept such an offer, and your daughter Emma was very spirited, not to say spiteful, in her refusal of my proposition, telling me plainly that she would rather starve than marry me."

"Good girl! Those daughters of mine are girls of grit. You can kill them, but you can't scare them."

And now I will thank you to open that other bottle of wine, and then tell me what sort of a Samaritan plan you will next propose."

"You know my object," said Brackett, after he had acceded to this request. "I intend to own that plantation."

"Inasmuch as I am dead," suggested Col. Thomassieu.

"Of course my opportunity is derived from your death. You are dead to the world, and yet you are sufficiently alive for my present purpose. I want you, colonel, to assign to me all your right, title and interest, actual and possible, in the plantation which you have mortgaged to me."

"That is a cool request," said the old gentleman, a little huskily. "Are you afraid, then, that your forged mortgage will not be sufficient for you?"

"Well—I want to cover the whole ground."

"I should say that you do, like the genuine good Samaritan that you are. But, how can a document executed by me after I am dead, be of any account?"

"Oh, I shall have it dated previous to your decease."

"And sealed, acknowledged, and officially certified to, and all that?"

"Certainly."

"And all that business to be a series of forgeries?"

"I suppose you would so style it."

"Then, Major Brackett—if you are, or ever was, a major—"

"I was a major in the Confederate army, sir."

"Then, Major Brackett, as you are so skillful at forgery, you may as well forge my name to your document, as you may depend upon it that I will sign nothing of the sort. I wonder what you take me for, anyhow?"

"I take you for a fine old Arkansas gentleman, one of the olden time, who is fond of his ease and anxious to avoid bother. The signature I ask for will save you a great deal of bother."

"You seem to forget that I am an old soldier, and that I have a character for courage and for honor. I am not so weak as you suppose me to be, but have quite as much grit as my girls. I am in your power, and you can kill 180 pounds of me, but you can't scare one ounce."

Major Brackett rose and bowed with his usual politeness.

"I will give you until noon, to-morrow, to reflect upon the matter," he said, "and hope that by that time you will think better of it. I leave the rest of the wine with you."

Col. Thomassieu easily finished the remainder of the wine, and went to bed that night with his head in a whirl, and slept until morning like a log, if so disrespectful an expression may be applied to such a fine old Arkansas gentleman.

The morning showed such a state of affairs as Major Brackett had calculated upon, and brought into view the style of coercion which he had intended to apply to his captive.

Nearly two bottles of champagne, added to the "moonshine" whisky with which he was thoroughly soaked, had completely upset the old gentleman's system and produced a craving which could only be satisfied by a hair, or several hairs, of "the dog that bit him." Never in his remembrance had he so severely felt the need of some stimulus to "set him up." Never had he discovered such an utter destitution of the refreshment he required.

The wine-bottles were empty, and there was not a drop of Jason's Island whisky to be found in the room. The colonel was so tremulous that he could scarcely dress himself. He tried the door, and found it locked. He looked out of the window, and saw an armed sentry standing there. Then he discovered that he was really a prisoner, and a perception of Brackett's "little game" began to dawn upon his confused senses. He beat upon the door, and it was opened by an armed man, who asked him what he wanted.

"I want to get out of here."

"You can't do it."

"Bring me something to drink, then."

"Nothin' but water, without Major Brackett's orders."

"Ask Major Brackett to please come here."

The sentry promised to do so, and closed and fastened the door. After a brief interval, which seemed an age to the old gentleman, Brackett made his appearance, and listened with a smile to the captive's statement of his deplorable condition and the absolute necessity that he should have some stimulus to sustain his sinking system.

"When you are ready to sign the paper I spoke of," said Brackett, "you shall have all you want; but not a drop until then."

The colonel indignantly repudiated this condition, and the interview terminated, and he was again shut in.

His condition grew worse, and his craving increased until it became a torture. A lingering sentiment of respect for the representative of a good old stock prevents a description of his sufferings. He was disgusted with himself, but it does not follow that the readers of this narrative need to be disgusted with him. He was getting along in years, his constitution was shaky, and his system had lately been so saturated with Jason's Island whisky that the withdrawal of his customary stimulant seemed to be more than he could endure. In short, he was on the verge of that fearful complaint, with which no well-regulated mind can have the least sympathy, "the horrors."

It was only his natural obstinacy that enabled him to endure his pangs until within an hour of noon. Then he called the sentry, and sent for Major Brackett, who came forward with a smiling face and two bottles of wine, the sight of which made the captive's eyes water. The bottles were placed

on the table, and Brackett produced a folded paper and pen and ink.

"I have sympathized deeply with you, my dear colonel," he said. "Your unfortunate condition has grieved me sorely, but business has compelled me to harden my heart. Now, if you will put your signature to this paper, I will take pleasure in supplying your wants."

"Give me some wine first," said the colonel. "I could make no signature now. Don't you see how shaky I am? Let me settle my nerves, and then I will do what you wish."

"Can I depend upon that?" asked Brackett.

"Of course you can. Whatever I may have done, I have never been known to go back on my word."

It required several glasses of champagne to satisfy Col. Thomassieu concerning the condition of his nerves, and between the doses he read the document which Major Brackett had prepared. At the close of the reading he signed his name where he was directed to sign it.

"The deed is done," he said; "but I give you fair warning that you will get little bit of it, if anything, as I have no right to transfer more than my life interest in that property, and if I live I will of course impeach this document."

"Am I to consider, then," asked Brackett, "that your mortgage to me was a plan to obtain money on false pretenses?"

"Not at all. I believed my life interest to be sufficient to secure that small loan. But I have good reason to believe that my daughters are the heirs of their brother, and that the plantation belongs to them."

"That may be your belief, colonel, but it is not mine. Anyhow, I am satisfied with what I have gained, and when I once get possession of that property under my mortgage, backed by this assignment, it will be no easy matter to oust me."

"Suppose that young fellow should buy it in?"

"I don't think he will get the chance. He will soon be as completely in my power as you are."

CHAPTER XX.

THE NIGHTHAWKS' LITTLE GAME—A CORNER IN ROGUES.

ALTHOUGH Major Brackett intimated to Col. Thomassieu that he intended to get possession of the person of Asa Sproule for the purpose of furthering his designs upon the Thomassieu property, the arrest of the boy and his abduction from the Bucksport jail were mainly due to the influence of the Bumsteads.

The "Honest Traders" were interested in the illicit distilling that was carried on at Jason's Island, and their flatboat had been brought to that vicinity for the purpose of carrying away a portion of the products of the surreptitious still. When the boat was moved from the point where the two boys found it, it was only dropped a short distance down the river, and was nearer to the island than it had been at the former location.

They had not abandoned their designs upon Asa Sproule, but had become more eager in pursuit of his presumed wealth when they learned through Major Brackett that he was a guest at the Thomassieu mansion. They were indignant, also, because of the manner in which he had slipped out of their hands, and because of their failure to obtain money on the draft which they had compelled him to indorse, and they naturally felt a consuming desire to "get even," both with him and with Snakeroot. It is due to Major Brackett to say that the plan for Sproule's abduction was invented by "Deacon" Bumstead and "Captain" Madden, and that he opposed it; but he was overruled by the Honest Traders and a number of the moonshiners who wanted a "lark."

When they had got Asa Sproule securely in their possession, they at once proceeded to put into execution the remainder of their plan, and sent to St. Louis a letter written by Major Brackett, its general style being suggested by "Deacon" Bumstead.

The following copy of that epistle will serve to show that its authors were not unacquainted with the method employed by Italian brigands for extorting money from their captives:

"MR. RICHARD BRASHEAR:

"We have in our power a youth named Asa Sproule, for whom you are guardian or agent. We are the same parties who got hold of him a while ago, and this time we mean to make a sure thing of the business. We don't want to hurt him, as it is only money we are after, and we will take good care of him if you come to time. If you don't you will never see him again. We want you to deposit the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars (\$25,000) immediately, with ———, Esq., of No. ——— Chestnut street, St. Louis. He has nothing to do with us in any shape, but has been instructed how to communicate with us, and for the sake of humanity he will undertake the job. If we do not hear from him within a week—which will give plenty of time—that you have deposited the money, Asa Sproule will lose one of his ears. At the end of ten days he will lose another, and at the end of two weeks his nose will be shaved off. We need not say what we will do after that time. There is nothing for you to do, and nothing you can do, but to pay over the money at once, as you cannot save him on any other terms, and you would only make the case worse for him by trying to take any other measures."

"Yours for the sake of humanity,"

"THE NIGHTHAWKS."

The expression, "for the sake of humanity," was the invention of Jacob Bumstead, and he prided himself upon it. The signature, "The Nighthawks," was the brilliant suggestion of Madden. Otherwise the letter was the production of Major Brackett, who put the ideas of the confederates into his own language.

The reception of this letter at St. Louis threw good old Richard Brashear into a state of consternation. He was unquestionably a brave man, but this was a danger which did not concern himself, and at such a distance that he could not face it. He knew from Snakeroot's account that the "Honest Traders" were a villainous and desperate set of men, and he did not doubt that they would put their threats in execution, if Asa Sproule was really in their power. Of this they had given no proof, but the question was soon settled by the arrival of Asa Scott's letter, which told of the abduction of his friend and the measures that were being taken to effect his rescue.

Richard Brashear was not a man who would suffer himself to be imposed upon, if imposition could be prevented, and his indignation was strongly excited against the "Honest Traders." Instead of drawing a check on Asa Sproule's account, and rushing frantically in search of the man with whom he was directed to deposit the money, he hastened to consult the Chief of Police, Captain McDonough, in whose cool head and long experience he had great confidence.

The chief read the letters that had been written by Major Brackett and Asa Scott, and his eyes lightened when he saw the name of the man with whom Mr. Brashear had been directed to deposit the sum of \$25,000.

"Had you thought of paying that money?" he asked.

"I had not thought of doing anything until I could get your advice," replied the broker.

"Leave the matter with me, then. It is out of our range, but we can connect ourselves with it. We have that man,"—pointing to the name in Major Brackett's letter—"just where we want him. He has been going crooked, lately, and we have a hold on him which we can use as a lever for moving him in this matter of yours. Wait a few moments, and it shall be attended to at once."

A shrewd and trusted detective officer received his instructions, and accompanied Mr. Brashear to the number on Chestnut street named in Major Brackett's letter.

The person designated was a lawyer of dubious antecedents and unsavory reputation, who had on more than one occasion received the attentions of the police. He exhibited some trepidation at the visit of the officer, with whom he was well acquainted, and who proceeded to make known his business with the utmost frankness and plainness.

"Read these letters, Mr. Boomer," he said, "and then tell me exactly the nature of your connection with this affair. The best thing you can do, in your own interest, is to make a clean breast of the whole business, and nothing less will satisfy me."

Mr. Boomer stoutly protested that he had no connection, whatever, with the parties who had captured Asa Sproule; that he did not know who they were, nor could he recognize the handwriting of the letter received by Mr. Brashear. He presumed that he must have had some previous acquaintance with them, as they evidently knew him, and he had received a letter, in a similar handwriting, instructing him as to what he was expected to do. He had merely been directed to receive the sum of \$25,000 from Mr. Brashear, and to take it to an obscure village in Arkansas, where he would pay it to a person whom he knew, the name of the person not being given, and he was assured that he would be well rewarded for that service.

"That is quite satisfactory," said the officer. "You will go as soon as possible to that place for the purpose named in the letter you received, and I and a few other men will accompany you. In the meantime I will have to take you in custody under a warrant issued in that bond forgery business, to make sure that you don't communicate with the parties who call themselves Nighthawks."

The lawyer was assured, however, that if he should do what was right in Mr. Brashear's affair, the charge upon which he was arrested would not be pressed.

"It is very fortunate," said the detective to Mr. Brashear afterward, "that your affair has come up just at this time, when we can bring a heavy pressure to bear on Boomer. If it had not been for that, I doubt whether we could have touched him."

Mr. Brashear hastened home to inform his wife of the bad news he had received concerning Asa Sproule, and to acquaint her with his intention of going at once to the assistance of his young friend. She was deeply afflicted by both of these items of information, but did not endeavor to dissuade him, and he took the morning train southward, accompanied by lawyer Boomer and an officer in charge of a detachment of reliable men who had the appearance of commercial travelers, workmen and railroad hands.

But before this relief party could reach its destination, events had culminated at Jason's Island.

CHAPTER XXI.

THOMASSIEU'S RESURRECTION—THE PIRATES IN A CORRAL.

ASA SPROULE was versed in the literature of lynchings, and when he was taken out of the Bucksport jail at night, by a band of masked men, he fully expected that he would be summarily put to death.

When he was mounted on a horse, and compelled to ride mile after mile in the midst of the band, thus apprehension was gradually dissipated. There was no evidence of an intention to stop and string him up to a tree, and he justly concluded that if the band had such a purpose in view, it would be carried into effect without delay.

His doubts on this subject were finally put at rest by the discovery of an acquaintance among his captors. The riders began to remove their masks when

they were a mile or so from Bucksport; but the night was so dark that Sproule could not easily distinguish faces. He soon recognized, however, the tones of a voice which he had good reason to remember, and a close inspection assured him that the owner of the voice was no other than Jacob Bumstead, the predatory proprietor of the flatboat "Honest Trader."

"Pears like you ought to know me, my son," said that worthy representative of the river rat fraternity. "I am good old Deacon Bumstead, who saved you from a watery grave, and who was goin' to do suthin' good for you when you run off in that scandalous way."

"Do you call it something good," asked Sproule, "to rob a fellow and threaten to murder him?"

"Dear me! Is that the way you look at it? Some folks never seem to know who their friends are. Maybe you would blame me fur goin' and takin' you out of that awful jail, where you mought have been hung fur hoss-stealin'? This is the second time good old Deacon Bumstead has saved your life, sonny."

"For something worse, I am afraid," remarked Sproule. "What do you mean to do with me now?"

"To put you where you will be safe, my son; to keep you out of bad company. Evil communications corrupt good manners. We don't mean to let you slip away from us so easy ag'in. I only wish I could git hold of that other boy."

"You had better be careful," answered Sproule, "or he will get hold of you, and when he does he will snatch you bald-headed. But you haven't told me why you want to shut me up."

"Have patience, my son, and you will learn all about it. We don't want to hurt you, if your friends will come down with the cash."

Jacob Bumstead vouchsafed no further information; but Asa Sproule had heard enough to satisfy him of the quality and intentions of his captors, and he was not surprised when he was placed in a log-cabin on Jason's Island, and the door was locked behind him. Finding a pile of blankets on the floor, he made a couch of them, and was soon sleeping as soundly as if he were in no sort of danger.

In the morning he had a stormy interview with Jacob Bumstead, who brought to him the letter which was afterward sent to Richard Brashear, and insisted upon reading it to him. This task he performed with some difficulty, dwelling with special unction upon the tortures and mutilations which were to be inflicted upon the boy in case Mr. Brashear should fail to "come down." He closed this solemn duty by requesting Sproule to write a note, to go with the letter, assuring Mr. Brashear that he had really been captured, and requesting that gentleman to procure his liberation in the manner proposed by his captors.

"Go to Texas!" promptly replied Asa. "I will do nothing of the sort if I should die for it; but I would gladly write him a letter if I could to advise him not to give you the money. I would rather be burned alive than waste one cent on such a set of scoundrels."

After the "Honest Trader" left him Asa heard a sound of picking and hammering on one side of the apartment in which he was confined, and soon a portion of the "chinking" which closed the apertures between the logs fell out on his side, and he perceived that some person in the other apartment desired to communicate with him.

"Who is that in there?" was asked in a voice which Asa fancied he could recognize.

"My name is Asa Sproule."

"Are you the boy who was playing cards on the War Eagle just before the explosion?"

"I am."

"Who bet on two aces?"

"Yes, and I am betting on them yet. Who are you, sir? Your voice is familiar to me, but it can't be—"

"Col. Thomassieu."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Asa. "I thought you were dead, and all your friends believe you to be dead."

"So I am told by that fellow who calls himself Major Brackett; but I am not sure, since you have come here, that I am quite dead. I may come to life and surprise some of them yet."

"I don't understand you, sir. Please tell me what you mean."

"Place your ear close to the crevice, and I will tell you all about it. This is inconvenient, I know, but what I have to say is quite important."

Col. Thomassieu told the boy his entire story, including the information which Major Brackett had gratuitously and frankly imparted to him concerning the plans of that polite person for getting possession of the Thomassieu estate, and Asa told of the escape of himself and Snakeroot after the explosion, their adventures on the flatboat Honest Trader, and the subsequent occurrences at the Thomassieu mansion and elsewhere.

It was a notable circumstance that previous to this conversation, Col. Thomassieu, owing to the peculiar effect of the Jason's Island "moonshine" upon his brain, or to his natural idiosyncrasies, had not been able to connect his personality with his own affairs. He had actually seemed to regard himself as a dead person, and to consider the plot so freely explained by Major Brackett, as a game in which he had no further interest than was derived from the amusement of watching the players. But the arrival of Asa Sproule, and the news which the boy gave him, brought him back to life, or at least connected him again with his family and human interests. He perceived that he had been stupefied by the mixture of raw liquor and champagne, with which he had been so freely supplied, and determined that he would touch the intoxicating fluids very sparingly thereafter. Then he began to take

new views of life, to have clearer notions of his desires and duties, and to seriously consider the possibility of effecting his escape.

"I have been dazed since that explosion," he said, to Sproule. "My head hasn't been right. But I am getting hold of things again, and know what I ought to do. I suppose that Brackett will never let me loose if he can help it, as the success of his plans depends upon the belief that I am dead; but you will be likely to get away from here."

"I don't know about that," replied Asa. "They say that unless my agent in St. Louis pays a big sum as ransom money, they will begin by cutting off my ears, and will finally make an end of me."

"They will hardly dare to do that," said the old gentleman, "or your friend in St. Louis will pay the money, or something will happen to save you. Don't you think so?"

"I only know that I am not a bit frightened. I have friends who will do what they can for me, but I have more confidence in the boy who came ashore from the War Eagle with me than anybody else. I wouldn't be surprised at anything Asa Scott might try to do to help me."

"When you get away," persisted Col. Thomassieu—"that is, if you ever do get away—you must remember what I have told you about the fraud in that mortgage, and about the paper which I was forced to sign. I want it distinctly understood that Brackett could never have forced me to sign that document, though I was terribly hard pressed, unless I had believed that it would be of no effect. I want you to keep these facts in your mind, so that when you get away you can make them known and defeat the plans of that rascal."

"It seems to me," replied Sproule, "that you stand a better chance to get away than I do. You can leave this house, I understand, when you choose to do so, but I am a close prisoner in my room."

"That is true. I can go outside, but they are careful that I shall have no chance to leave the island. Yet, there may be a chance, and I mean to keep my eyes open for both of us."

Following the old gentleman's advice, Asa Sproule carefully restored the piece of "chinking" to its place between the logs after their conversations, as it was evident that they ought not to allow the fact that they were communicating with each other to be discovered.

Thus passed the first day of Asa Sproule's captivity, and he checked it off at night as one of the seven that remained to him before the threatened operation upon his ears should begin.

The next morning he was called to the wall, and when he reached the aperture he perceived that Col. Thomassieu was considerably excited.

"I have taken the first step toward an escape," said the old gentleman. "I have got a gun."

"How did you get it?" asked Sproule.

"Picked it up where one of the rascals had laid it down, and brought it in here without being noticed. It is a repeating rifle and fully loaded. I have taken up a plank in my room and hid it under the flooring. Perhaps I may have a chance to use it before this day is done."

"Be careful what you do," warned Sproule.

"Of course I must be careful, but I feel it in my bones that something is going to happen."

Something did happen. Asa Sproule had hardly finished his dinner when Col. Thomassieu, more excited than ever, called him to the wall, and hastily informed him that an attack was being made, or was about to be made, upon the island.

"It is some sort of a boat or raft," he explained, "with which the attack is made. These rascals are getting ready for a fight. There! it has already begun. Don't you hear the firing? I am going out to see the sport."

Sproule besought him, for the sake of his daughters, to be careful of himself.

"Of course I must be careful, but I feel as if I am about to be brought back to life. If I should be mistaken in this impression, my boy, be sure to remember all I have told you."

Col. Thomassieu went out to watch the expected fight, and took the rifle which he had "found." He could not have said that he had any definite intention in his mind in so doing, further than a desire to take part in the battle if he could do so effectively; but he knew that his head was cool and his nerves were steady, and he was careful to keep out of sight of the defenders of the island.

As he drew near the point at which the attack was being made, he saw a large float bearing down upon the island from the main land. No men were visible on that strange contrivance, although it was moved by sweeps, and this fact seemed to annoy and disconcert the moonshiners and their allies, who saw that they were using their ammunition without harming their enemies.

At last one of them climbed a tree, and his rifle was handed to him from below. Ascending yet higher, he soon placed himself in a position that suited him, took a careful aim, and fired. The shot was followed by a cry from the float.

"Good for you, Jerry!" shouted the leader of the moonshiners. "Give 'em some more of the same sort!"

Before Jerry could take aim again, Col. Thomassieu brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The man dropped from his perch, and fell heavily to the ground.

At this moment Major Brackett came running to where the old gentleman was standing and waiting the effect of his shot.

"Curse you!" he exclaimed. "Take that for your meddling!"

"That" was a pistol-shot, and the bullet struck Col. Thomassieu in the breast, and he staggered and fell.

CHAPTER XXII.

A NAVAL ATTACK.

EARLY in the morning Arthur Westleigh met his friend Capt. Roberts at the point on the shore of the lake which the latter had designated. Although it was not yet sunrise when he arrived, he found Roberts already there, and learned that he had been on the ground for some time.

The point selected by the Government official was on an arm of the lake which ran some distance into the land, and was concealed by trees from the observation of those on the island. To this place he had caused to be carted during the night some heavy planks, with a supply of tools, spikes and other implements, and his men were busily at work, getting out logs, cutting them into lengths of twenty feet, and rolling them into the water.

"I must give you credit for being a business man," confessed Westleigh. "I had not expected to see such a display of energy as this."

"I mean business," replied Roberts. "You may be sure of that. I want to do such a piece of work here as would secure my promotion, if the revenue service were like the army service, and advancement could be secured as it ought to be."

"What are you going to do? I am anxious to understand your plan."

"It is simple enough. I told you that it would be necessary to make a naval attack, and I am building a floating-battery. It will be ready in a few hours, and then we will move on the enemy's works. I shall want you and your friends to co-operate with me from the other side of the lake and to guard the sunken road that leads to the island. But you must keep yourselves concealed until the time for action comes, and I will fire one shot for a signal when we are ready to start. That will be sufficient for you, and the enemy may not notice it. My only fear is that you will be too anxious to join the fight, and I now warn you that you must not attempt to cross to the island until you have reason to believe that we are landing, or at least until the attention of the enemy is entirely drawn to us."

These instructions were plain enough, and Westleigh proceeded to obey them at once. He rode rapidly around the lake, being well acquainted with the route, to the head of the sunken road. Then he kept on, up the bridge-path, until he met a party coming from the direction of Bucksport.

This party was headed by Judge Dalby and Asa Scott. Snakeroot had satisfactorily performed the duty that had been assigned to him, easily securing the services of Jim Biggs, the Bucksport tavern-keeper, who had enlisted four other men for whom he could vouch as thoroughly reliable.

Judge Dalby reached Bucksport in time to complete the negotiations, promising to pay the men well for their services, and it was understood that they were to endeavor to effect the release of Asa Sproule, in connection with an unknown force on the other side of the lake.

By common consent Judge Dalby was made the commander of this force, as he had served in the Southern army during the civil war, and three of the men engaged for this expedition had served under him. Arthur Westleigh repeated to him Capt. Roberts's instructions, and he led the party to the lake, halting at a sufficient distance from the shore to be secure against the observation of those on the island, and sending Westleigh forward as a picket to watch the lake.

Thus the force on that side of the lake was composed of eight men, including Snakeroot, who had not the least doubt that he ought to be counted as a man.

On the other side Capt. Roberts's operations proceeded briskly. He was accustomed to put energy and method into his work; and thus it was always speedily and correctly done.

When the logs were put into the water they were securely spiked together, forming a strong and serviceable raft, which was partly planked over. At the end which was intended to face the island a stout bulkhead of heavy plank was built, about four feet high, and well braced. It was not loop-holed, as it was intended for defensive purposes alone, and it was thought best to reserve the fire of the force until it could be used effectually at close range. There was, however, a "peep-hole" for Capt. Roberts, to enable him to direct the course of the fleet.

This contrivance was to be propelled by two large oars, or sweeps, with tholpinsset in blocks at the edge of the raft. Each oar was worked by two men, who sat with their backs against the bulkhead, close to which the remainder of the force crouched. To partly counterbalance the weight at this end, a heavy log was laid upon the other end and fastened there.

When all the details were completed, the men stepped on the raft and took their places, each armed with a repeating rifle and a revolver. Capt. Roberts fired a shot in the air, as the signal to Westleigh, and the float was poled down the "branch" and out into the lake.

The movement of this clumsy craft was slow, but silent, and it had advanced a considerable distance from the shore before its presence was discovered by those on the island.

The discovery caused a great excitement, and soon all the moonshiners and their allies were collected on the shore of the island, watching the ungainly float, and wondering what it could mean. They hailed it, but got no reply, though it was evident that there were men upon it, and that invisible hands were working the sweeps.

There could be no question that the intentions of the float were hostile, and the moonshiners soon began to make their bullets rattle around it, but without piercing the thick bulkhead, and without eliciting

ing any reply. Capt. Roberts directed the machine toward a sort of cape on the island, to save his men from being subjected to a flanking fire from the shore on either side, and the bulkhead was believed to be a sufficient protection against a front attack.

"We are safe enough," he said, as the float approached the island, "unless they should rake us from the tops of the trees. Ah! there is one going up now!"

The firing on shore stopped for a few minutes, and then a shot came from the tree which Capt. Roberts had noticed, and the bullet struck the leg of one of the men on the raft, eliciting a cry of surprise and pain. But the next moment another shot was fired, and the man in the tree fell to the ground.

"Pull with all your might, boys!" commanded Capt. Roberts. "If we can run her in now, we will have them where we want them."

The moonshiners soon recovered from the consternation caused by the fall of the marksman from the tree, and turned their attention to the float; but they had fired only a few dropping shots when it was grounded at the distance of about twenty yards from the shore.

Capt. Roberts and his men, who had been waiting for this moment, rose to their feet as soon as the float stopped, and delivered a well-directed volley at the moonshiners. Then they jumped into the water, which was hardly more than knee deep, and made the best of their way to the shore, firing as they went, and spreading out so as to weaken the fire of their antagonists.

Capt. Roberts's signal shot had been heard and understood by Judge Dalby's force on the other side of the lake, though the men on the island, if they noticed it at all, had probably supposed it to have been fired by some solitary hunter. After the signal they waited impatiently for further developments, keeping close to their horses, ready to mount and ride over the sunken road as soon as the command should be given.

Judge Dalby went down to where Westleigh was stationed, that he might better be able to judge when he ought to bring his force into action.

After the lapse of half an hour, though the time seemed much longer to the anxious watchers, occasional shots were heard on the island, and the young naturalist became excited.

"The fight has begun," he said. "Let us go over."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry, my young friend," cautioned the judge, who had heard firing on many battle-fields. "Only one side is engaged as yet, and that very slightly. They are trying to draw the fire of our friends, but without success. If we should cross over there too soon, we would be likely to make a mess of it. If Capt. Roberts and his men should by any accident fail to make a landing, the islanders would turn on us and wipe us out easily. We must strike as soon as possible after Roberts strikes, but must wait for him to give the first blow."

The firing soon became more rapid, but Judge Dalby's practiced ear enabled him to decide that the moment for an advance had not yet arrived.

"The time will soon come," he said. "We will go back to our horses and get ready to start."

In a few moments the party were mounted, and waiting on the shore, at the head of the sunken road. As the moonshiners were all collected on the opposite side of the island, it was not supposed that they would observe the enemy that had come up in their rear.

There was a lull in the firing, then a rattle of shots, and then a close and heavy volley.

"That means business," cried Judge Dalby. "Now's our time, men. Forward!"

The party pushed their horses as rapidly as possible over the sunken road, led by Arthur Westleigh as the one best acquainted with the ford, who was closely followed by Judge Dalby and Asa Scott.

Reaching the island, they tethered their horses to the bushes, and hastened forward on foot to the assistance of their friends.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MOONSHINERS IN ECLIPSE—A HARD CROWD.

The moonshiners presented a bold front to their assailants, when they discovered their character and numbers, and fought desperately and well. They had no thought of retreating, and, doubtless, did not pause to consider whether the ford was available for that purpose or not, as they hated the Government men with a mortal hatred, and desired nothing but to fight them to the death.

Capt. Roberts's men had the advantage in the quality of their weapons, but the moonshiners had the advantage of position, as they could shelter themselves behind the trees on the shore, and pick off their assailants as they advanced through the water. But the latter soon reached the trees, and availed themselves of the shelter they afforded.

The forces were then nearly equal, and it was doubtful with which side the victory would finally rest, when Judge Dalby's command appeared in the rear of the moonshiners, and dashed forward with a yell. By a previous arrangement with Capt. Roberts, the men of both bodies of the attacking force had tied strips of white muslin around their hats as a distinguishing mark, and Judge Dalby was careful to direct the fire of his party so that it would not injure their friends.

Finding themselves between two fires, and not knowing the strength of the enemy in their rear, the moonshiners were seized with a panic, and the fight was soon converted into a defeat. Most of the men who had not been placed *hors du combat*, threw up their hands and surrendered, and those who still endeavored to resist were captured or shot down.

One of the last to give up the fight was old Jacob Bumstead, who was in the act of pouring a charge into his muzzle-loading rifle, when he was confronted by Asa Scott.

"Drop that gun, you old scallawag!" said the boy, as he brought his rifle to his shoulder. "Drop it as if it was red-hot, or over your tumbler."

Bumstead dropped the weapon at once, and an expression of intense gratification overspread his coarse features as his eyes rested on Snakeroot.

"Is it really you, my son?" he exclaimed. "One of the boys I saved from a watery grave! The people who live here told me that they were attacked by robbers, and I was fighting for my life; but I must be safe, now, as I am sure that such a fine young feller as you wouldn't be mixed up with robbers."

"Wish I may drop dead this minute," said Snakeroot, "if you ain't the cheekiest old sinner I ever struck. Afraid of robbers, are you? Well, you ought to know what a robber is, if any man knows. Saved me from a watery grave, did you? Now I want you to walk square off and take me to that other chap you saved from a watery grave and wanted to burn the life out of."

The Honest Trader scratched his head as if he were considering a difficult problem. Then he looked up with what he intended for a benignant smile.

"You mean the young gentleman who was took up fur hoss-stealin'," he said. "His friend, Major Brackett, got him out of jail, and brought him here fur safe keepin', out of the way of his inimies. We've took the best kind o' keer of that dear young feller, and you'll find him safe and well."

"Lead me to him, then," insisted Snakeroot. "I don't believe a word you say, but I do know that if you have harmed a hair of his head you will have to suffer for it. Don't be looking at that gun on the ground, but trot right along, and be sure you go straight, or I will let you know that this rifle shoots straight."

Jacob Bumstead led the way, without any more words, to the cabin in which Asa Sproule was confined, Snakeroot following him with his rifle held ready for use.

"I've got the key," said the old hypocrite, in an apologetic way, as he stopped at the door. "That's because I have been feedin' the dear young feller and tendin' to him mighty close."

"No doubt of that," said Snakeroot, "and it's time for somebody to attend to you mighty close. Don't give me any more of your gab, but open that door and walk right in."

Bumstead obeyed, and Asa Sproule, who had been anxiously awaiting news of the issue of the conflict, uttered a cry of joy as he saw his friend in the doorway, and ran to grasp his hand.

"Hold on, Ace!" was the warning of Snakeroot, who was not yet ready to take his eye off of Bumstead. "The first thing for you to do is to take your handkerchief and tie that old sinner's hands behind his back so tight that he can't use them. He is as dangerous as a copperhead snake."

Sproule willingly applied himself to this task, and tied Bumstead's hands so tightly as to make him wince.

"What do you think, Ace?" said Snakeroot. "This old rascal says that he saved you and me from a watery grave, and claims to be your best friend."

"I will have something to say about that," replied Sproule, "but have no time to attend to his case just now. Where is Col. Thomassieu? Have you seen him?"

"Col. Thomassieu? I thought he was dead."

"He is alive, or was alive this morning, and has been confined on this island. He went out to see the fight, and I am afraid that he has got into trouble, or he would have come back to me."

"We will go and look for him. You go first, you supreme old scallawag!"

In the meantime a scene of a different character was being acted in another part of the island.

When the fight was over, and the moonshiners had surrendered, Major Brackett was found standing with his back to a tree, smoking a cigar. There was no weapon visible on his person or near him, and he had the appearance of having taken no part in the contest, and of feeling no interest in the combatants.

But at a little distance from where he stood lay Col. Thomassieu, stretched upon the ground, and apparently wounded.

To this point the captive moonshiners were brought, all of them securely bound, except such as were too severely wounded to attempt to escape. Among them was Nat Bumstead, whose right arm had been shattered by a rifle-ball.

With Capt. Roberts came Arthur Westleigh, the only man of the party who could claim any medical knowledge, to do what he could for the wounded of both sides.

Before he began his inspection of the moonshiners he perceived the prostrate form of Col. Thomassieu, and ran and knelt at the old gentleman's side.

"My God, Roberts!" he exclaimed. "Here is a sad surprise. This is Col. Thomassieu, and he is dead."

"Not dead, but dying," feebly muttered the colonel, and Westleigh partly raised him and gave him some stimulus to revive him.

"How did you come here?" asked the naturalist.

"Long story," answered the old gentleman.

"Mortgage a fraud. Ask Sproule. He knows all about it. Shot a man out of a tree, and Brackett shot me."

Westleigh looked up at Major Brackett, who was smoking as placidly as if he had no concern in what was going on about him.

"Secure that man, Capt. Roberts," said the natu-

ralist. "He shot Col. Thomassieu, and I believe that he is the leader of the gang."

"It is false," replied Brackett. "I have not fired a shot to-day. I am here on private business, and have no connection with these people."

"You are the worst of the batch!" exclaimed Nat Bumstead. "I saw you shoot that old gentleman arter he'd knocked Jerry outen the tree. We've stuck to you through thick and thin, and now you want to throw off on us."

"It is false," said Brackett again. "I am a gentleman, and can prove my character. I have nothing to do with such cattle as you."

Nat Bumstead's indignation, combined with the pain of his wound, turned his face livid.

"Go back on us, will you?" he exclaimed. "Then we'll go back on you, you mean dog, and will let people know whether you had anything to do with us or not. I want to say a word to the old gentleman thar afore he drops off. Thar's a boy who goes by the name of Tom Brackett—"

The sentence was never finished. As quick as thought Major Brackett drew a pistol and fired it at Nat Bumstead, at the distance of a few steps. The ball must have pierced his heart, as he fell backward at once, and never spoke again.

Major Brackett threw away his pistol when he saw the effect of his shot, and was at once seized and securely bound.

Col. Thomassieu started convulsively at the sound of the pistol-shot, and then sunk back and died in Arthur Westleigh's arms.

As Nat Bumstead was speaking, his father had come up in the rear of the group. When the young man dropped under Major Brackett's shot, the father stumbled forward, fell on his knees at the side of his son, and actually burst into tears.

His grief was so genuine and intense that Asa Sproule and Asa Scott took compassion on him. Snakeroot wiped away his tears with a handkerchief, and both the boys assisted him to his feet and led him away from the scene of death.

"It's no use, old man," said Snakeroot. "He is as dead as Julius Cæsar, and grieving won't bring him back."

"My boy!" moaned Jacob Bumstead, as he continued to sob. "My only boy! It was a cowardly, sneakish shot that killed him. I wish I could cut that man to pieces."

"Your son v as saying something about Tommy Brackett when he was shot," said Sproule. "Do you know what he was going to say?"

"Yes, I do, and I will tell it arter awhile, but not now. I will do all I kin to git even with that—that murderer; but I must git away from whar he is. Take me to Tommy Brackett, and I'll tell suthin' that'll make you open your eyes."

Sproule and Westleigh had a consultation with Capt. Roberts concerning Jacob Bumstead. They told him that in their belief the old man had an important revelation to make, and asked that he might be taken to the Thomassieu place.

"That can be done, of course," replied Roberts.

"If I can get permission from Judge Dalby I will take all my prisoners to his place for the present, as some of the men have relatives about here, and it would not be safe to put them in the Bucksport jail."

The permission of Judge Dalby was easily obtained, and preparations were made for leaving the island. The illicit still was destroyed, and all the receptacles that held "mash" and "moonshine" were demolished. It was evident that large quantities of illicit whisky had been manufactured on the island, and Capt. Roberts plumed himself upon the importance of his capture.

The work of destruction was hurried up, as the afternoon was passing away, and as soon as possible all the living were carried on horses to the main land, including the wounded of both sides, and excepting a guard that was left in charge of the dead, until their bodies could be removed for burial. Two of Capt. Roberts's men were numbered with the dead, and three of the moonshiners, including Nat Bumstead. Col. Thomassieu was the sixth who was thus accounted for, and Capt. Roberts was obliged to confess that the seizure of the island had cost a hard and bloody battle.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

The cavalcade under the command of Capt. Roberts moved so slowly that it was not until after dark that it reached Judge Dalby's place. Then the resources of his establishment were strained to furnish food for the party, and medical assistance for the wounded was secured. These were properly cared for and made comfortable, and the unwounded prisoners were lodged in a commodious outbuilding, and a strong guard was set over them. All were thus disposed of but Major Brackett, and he was assigned other quarters at the special request of Jacob Bumstead, who exhibited a not unreasonable degree of fear of the man who had killed his son.

Asa Sproule, after receiving the joyful greetings of Flora Dalby, rode off with Arthur Westleigh to the Thomassieu place, to inform the ladies of the events of the day, and to break to them as gently as possible the news of the death of their father.

Although the hour was late, Laura and Emma Thomassieu had not retired, but were anxiously awaiting intelligence of the expedition, which Westleigh had told them they might expect to receive that night.

Their joy at the safe return of Arthur Westleigh and the recovery of Asa Sproule was great; but a cloud followed this bit of sunshine when they listened to the account of the captivity and death of Col. Thomassieu. Yet there was fully as much surprise as sorrow in their reception of this sad news. They

had fully believed, some time previously, that their father was dead. Their grief had then grieved itself out, and its freshness was not to be renewed by the discovery of what might be called his second death.

In fact, there was such an appearance of romance and unreality in the story of Col. Thomassieu's escape from the explosion, his subsequent captivity on Jason's Island, the fraudulent mortgage, and Major Brackett's proceedings in general, that the ladies could not fairly realize what was told to them, and it was evident that time would be required to enable the entire truth to sink into their minds.

But they appreciated the results, although they did not readily assimilate the details.

"Is it clear, then," asked Laura, "that that very polite rascal has no hold whatever upon the plantation, and that it belongs to us since poor pa is really dead?"

"There is no doubt of that," replied Westleigh, "unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Why, Miss Thomassieu, one of those two flatboatmen was shot by Major Brackett, just as he was about to say something he wished your father to hear."

"What can it have been? You know something more. Don't excite our curiosity without satisfying it."

"I can only say," replied Westleigh, "that it was something about the boy who escaped from the flatboat, and for whom you have cared so kindly."

The female mind is prone to jump at conclusions, and Laura jumped at once.

"About Tommy!" exclaimed Laura. "Is it possible that he is our lost little brother? I have been loving him ever since he came here."

"That will be so nice!" said Emma, jumping a little further than her sister. "I only wish that poor pa could have lived to see his boy."

"You are going entirely too fast, ladies," protested Arthur Westleigh. "You have no right to convert my slight suspicions into certainties, and I ought not to have said as much as I have, as it has given you hopes that may have no foundation at all. But the revelation, whatever it is, is about Tommy, and the old flatboatman, who has promised to complete the statement which his son began, says that it will make us open our eyes."

Both the ladies declared that their eyes were opened already, and that such a mixture of sad and joyful news was enough to upset them entirely.

Early the next morning they rode to Judge Dalby's, escorted by Westleigh and Sproule, and accompanied by Tommy Brackett, upon whom they lavished as much tenderness as if he had already been declared the heir of their house.

That declaration was soon made. At Judge Dalby's house Jacob Bumstead was brought into a room in which the ladies were seated with Tommy Brackett, Capt. Roberts, Arthur Westleigh, and Asa Sproule and Asa Scott. Tommy manifested considerable trepidation at the appearance of the Honest Trader, and carefully kept out of his reach during the interview, although assured that he was in no sort of danger.

The eagerness of the ladies to hear the promised revelation caused Bumstead to hesitate, and he began to gain confidence and to negotiate, insisting that he should be "let off," if he made a clean breast of everything. Finally, in consideration of the death of his son, and of his promise to disclose the hiding-place of a quantity of "moonshine" whisky, Capt. Roberts agreed to his terms.

The story he told concerning Tommy Brackett met the expectations of Laura and Emma Thomassieu. The boy was Col. Thomassieu's son Martin, who had been stolen from the plantation, years ago, by Jacob Bumstead himself, acting under the instructions of Major Brackett, who had paid well for the job. The old man said that he had kept, and still had in his possession, a fine and handsome garment which the little fellow had worn when he was stolen.

"Was it an embroidered sack?" eagerly asked Laura.

Yes, that was what it might be called, and Bumstead described the article as well as he could. His description was clumsy, but sufficient for Laura, who recognized the garment as one which her loving fingers had worked for her baby brother.

The rest of Bumstead's narrative tallied with the account which Tommy Brackett had given of himself, and the boy was duly recognized as Martin Thomassieu, the heir of the Thomassieu estate under his grandfather's will.

It may be added that Aunt Hannah, the old negress who had taken such a fancy to the boy, declared that she had suspected him of being "young massa Martin" since the first time she had seen him after his escape from the Honest Traders.

Before the prisoners were removed from Judge Dalby's place, Major Brackett was brought into the presence of Laura and Emma Thomassieu and their friends, and was informed of the revelations concerning him that had been made by Col. Thomassieu and Jacob Bumstead.

He received the information with an air of unconcern. He had lost his "stake," and took no further interest in the game.

"It was all the fault of that old fool of a flatboatman," he said. "When he insisted upon getting hold of young Sproule, for the purpose of forcing money out of him, I told him that he would bring us into trouble. I had the game in my own hands, but he broke it up."

"You perceive," said Westleigh, "that we have discovered that your mortgage was fraudulently forged to ten times its real amount, and that the forgery has made it void."

"So you tell me. I have nothing to say about it."

"You must also acknowledge that even if there had been no forgery, it could not be good in law, as young Martin Thomassieu was the real owner of the property."

"Have it your own way. I have nothing to say about it."

"Perhaps you may be willing to tell us, Major Brackett, why it is that you have so vindictively pursued Col. Thomassieu and his family, beginning the pursuit so long ago. There are many estates against which you might have operated more successfully, if your only object had been to get possession of the property."

"That is true," replied Brackett. "I had a good reason, and I don't object to telling it. When I was quite a young man, old Martin Thomassieu, the grandfather of that boy, denounced me on a steamboat as a cheat, and subjected me to the degradation of a horsewhipping. I swore to be revenged, and I don't know but I have good cause to be satisfied. My plans have not succeeded as well as I meant they should; but I stole his favorite grandchild, and now I have sent his son to meet him in the other world."

"For that crime you will have to hang!" indignantly exclaimed Laura.

"Bet you five to two that I don't."

It may be stated here that Major Brackett did not hang for that or any other crime. Capt. Roberts caused his prisoners to be confined in the safest county jail in that section of country; but they had not been there long when Brackett, with Madden and another, broke out and made their escape, and were not recaptured.

The body of Col. Thomassieu was buried at the homestead, and the grief of his daughters was tempered by their joy at the discovery of their lost brother, for whom Laura was appointed guardian.

The cloud upon young Martin Thomassieu's title to the plantation was removed by process of law, the forgery in Brackett's mortgage being visible on a close inspection of that document.

Richard Brashear received the news of the capture of Jason's Island before he reached his destination. He sent back the police force which he had brought from St. Louis, and made his way to the Thomassieu plantation, where he was rapturously received by Asa Sproule and Asa Scott, and cordially welcomed by the rest of "the family." After resting himself and enjoying the hospitalities of the ladies, he accompanied the two boys on the trip to New Orleans which had been so rudely interrupted.

When Asa Sproule had satisfied himself with seeing the sights in New Orleans, he admitted that he had had enough of "life" for the present, and proposed to his companions that they should stop at the Thomassieu place on their way back to St. Louis—a proposition to which they gladly assented.

While they were taking their ease on the plantation Arthur Westleigh was married to Emma Thomassieu, and after his marriage he began to agitate for a change of residence. Martin's health, which had been poor when he escaped from the Honest Trader, showed no material improvement, and Westleigh urged that he needed a Northern climate for sanitary reasons, as well as educational purposes. As Westleigh was anxious to establish his home in the North, Laura yielded to his arguments, and accepted in the boy's behalf an offer that was made by Mr. Brashear on the part of Asa Sproule for the purchase of the estate.

So Laura and Martin went to Ohio with their sister and her husband, and Asa Sproule settled down as owner of a fine plantation, with Snakeroot as his assistant and factotum. As soon as Sproule reached his twenty-first birthday he married pretty Flora Dalby, and in the course of time the two plantations will become one.

Asa Scott might become a landed proprietor if he desired to; but he is a very popular young man in that region, and expects to enter public life.

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